

The Gospel Story: God's Wrath

A Study of Romans

Romans 1:18-32

Pastor Bryan Clark

Let's imagine this morning that I told you a story about a six-year-old little girl that was physically abused and ultimately beaten to death by a couple of teenage boys. How would you feel about that? Now let's imagine that I told you that the little girl's parents were right there and watched it all and, in total indifference, did nothing to stop it. What would you think about that? And then imagine I told you that when the parents were asked why they did nothing they said, "It's because we're such loving parents". What would you think about that? I think we would all think the same thing. "If you were such loving parents, why didn't you do something to stop it?" I will tell you this: As a parent, if I saw that happening to one of my children, I guarantee you there would be fireworks! So why would it be different with God? Why would a culture seek to convince itself that because God is so loving, that He has no wrath, that rather He can just be indifferent while His children are systematically destroyed by sin?

That's what we want to talk about this morning. I would suggest to you it is precisely because God *does* love that God must be a God of wrath. If you have your Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 1. Last week in verses 16 and 17, Paul reminded us that he is not ashamed of the gospel, *for it is the explosive power of God for salvation*—salvation for wholeness, for restoration, for reconciliation, for satisfying that storm that rages in everyone's soul. He reminded us in verse 17 that the gospel story reveals God's righteousness: a two-sided coin that God is righteous in His character; He's *right*; He's the standard of righteousness. But also it's His *rightness* that compels Him to find a way to make sinful people stand *right* in His presence. The gospel story reveals both sides of the righteousness of God. He reminds us that it's only by faith that sinful people can be made right and, in being made right, we finally live. Verse 18, then, is the beginning of the gospel story.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven... (*NASB, Romans 1:18a,)

It's interesting that Paul cannot get a half of a verse into the gospel story without talking about the **wrath of God**. There are people today that want to believe God is loving, but He has no wrath. That makes no sense. For God to watch people that He loves systematically destroyed by sin and simply be indifferent toward it all, does not reflect love; it reflects hatred. Indifference flows out of hatred. I could not possibly follow a God that watches sin destroy the world and not care about it! How could you follow such a God? I can follow a God who loves me so much that He gets angry at that which seeks to destroy me. I would suggest to you that the reason people today are down on the wrath of God is because they want no accountability. If my worldview is that I can be my own god, I make my own rules, I make my own decisions, then the natural end of that belief system is: there should be no accountability. No one should tell me what to do and no one should ultimately hold me accountable. So I want to believe God is loving but there's no wrath—which is nonsense. The gospel story only makes sense if you understand God's wrath. Now God's wrath is not some maniacal rage where God is some monster in the sky, out of control. God's wrath is His anger. It's actually a legal term. It's God's punitive justice; it's God holding people accountable for their choices—because that's the right thing to do. He says in verse 18,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness
...(Vs. 18a)

Ungodliness means just what the word sounds like it means. Ungodliness is *un-god-ness* if you'll allow me to make up a word. It's simply a rejection of God. Now it's not necessarily a rejection as an atheist; it's simply saying God is not god in my life. God's not going to tell me what to do. God's not going to define the boundaries. I'm going to reject that. I'm going to be my own god; I'm going to run my own life. Unrighteousness, then, is the behavior that flows out of that decision so,

...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...or by unrighteousness. These are not people who don't know the truth, but they suppress it and they seek to suppress it by their behavior....because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. (Vs. 18-20)

These people suppress the truth. How do they know the truth? *Because God has made the truth evident.* God has put within them, as people made in the image of God, the ability to see—through what God has made—that there is a God, that what we have today is the handiwork of God and if He is God, therefore, there is accountability to this God. Sometimes people say if this gospel story is true, what about people living in tribes in Africa or Ecuador or someplace like that? What Paul is saying is *every person*, as a person made in the image of God, has within them the God-given capacity to look at the world and say, “There has to be a God”. The text says, God is **clearly seen**; you can't miss Him—to the extent that nobody has an excuse! As a matter of fact, that phrase is a legal phrase. It means you simply have no defense. No one can stand in God's courtroom and say, “I didn't know.” God would say, “You did know! I know that you knew because I put it in your heart and I revealed Myself through the majesty of a mountain, through the beauty of a sunset, through everything that's been made.” There are no excuses. You know the truth but you suppress the truth in order to live your life your way. He says...

For even though they knew God, meaning know about God, they did not honor Him...they did not glorify Him; they did not worship Him...as God or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (Vs. 21)

That word **futile** means *vain*; it means *empty*. They became futile in their attempts to explain God away. Now think about this. This was written two thousand years ago. Two thousand years later, think of the technology, think of the science, think of what we now know to be true of our universe—the vastness of the universe, the intricacies of the universe—the intricacies of all that God has made is amazing! So we're really going to look at all that and say, “This all happened by accident?” That's what Paul is saying, that **they became futile in the speculations**. It becomes ridiculous that people would think such a thing.

Now there are different ways that Christians can understand Genesis, Chapter 1 but, at the end of the day, you have to wrestle with the question: Why is there *something* rather than *nothing*, and where did it all come from? Are we going to look at the unbelievable complexities of the universe and say it was all an accident? Really? Really...that's what we would conclude? I just saw an article again this week where the writer was seeking to explain that everything came from nothing. Really?? Can it work that way? Is that not vain speculation? How can a cause and effect theory

start with an effect? How can we believe that? It's illogical. If you saw the movie *Expelled* several years ago, Ben Stein presses this question to Richard Dawkins, "Where did it all begin?" And he keeps pressing it until Richard Dawkins is in a corner. He has nowhere to go and he finally says, "Maybe it came from the Martians!" Really? That's science? That's your scientific conclusion—"It came from the Martians?" Even if it came from the Martians, where did the Martians get it? It doesn't answer the question. But that's exactly what Paul is talking about. We get to the point, in order to protect a worldview, where, "I'm in charge and I'm my own god," that I'll give the most ridiculous explanations rather than choosing to believe the truth. We suppress the truth in order to protect a worldview without God. Verse 22:

Professing to be wise...we're so smart; that's why we believe this...they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Vs. 22-23)

Convincing ourselves we're so smart we can explain away God, we actually become **fools**. And we make the worst exchange in history. We exchange the glory of the **incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man**. This text has Genesis 1, 2 and 3 woven all throughout. Imagine the beauty and the majesty of the Creator God and this paradise that He created and His desire that we would live in such paradise forever with Him, and we exchanged that and traded it for a world where we're in charge, with all the consequences that go with that decision. Verse 24:

Therefore...Remember our adage: whenever you see the word "therefore", you stop and see what it's there for. In other words, because of the great exchange, this is now what we live with. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.
(Vs. 24-25)

Chose to believe a lie rather than the truth in order to **worship the creature rather than the Creator!** This takes us right back to Genesis, Chapter 3. The temptation to Adam and Eve was based on a lie: that God is not as good as you think He is and if you were god, if you were in charge, life would be better. So why not choose to be your own god and worship the creature rather than the Creator? That was the great exchange. They believed a lie and introduced chaos into God's paradise.

Why in verse 24 does Paul specifically identify sexual sin as the result of that choice? The word **impurity** is a reference to *sexual sin*. Is that because sexual sin is the top of the list of the worst sins? And the answer would be, "No, I don't think that's what he's saying." What he is creating is an imagery that pictures what is happening. The best way to understand this is to remind ourselves, in Genesis 1 when God introduces the creation of people made in His image, He's very specific that we are created in His image—male and female—saying that our sexuality is tied to this image of God in which we were created. And then the very first command is, "*Be fruitful and multiply*". For those that think God is a prude, they need to remember the first command was, "Go have sex!" Why is that? Genesis 2 helps us with that. Because God intended for this sexual intimacy between a husband and a wife to be a picture, a taste of the intimacy that God wants to have with us. So Genesis 2 ends with this beautiful picture of Adam and Eve both naked, and they felt no shame. Throughout the Old and New Testament there is consistent reference to the fact that the relationship between God and His people is pictured in the relationship of a husband with his wife, in the New Testament, with Christ and His church. So you have to start with that imagery. So get in your head

the imagery of a husband and a wife and a beautiful picture of God with His people. I can experience a deep, satisfying intimacy with my lifelong, one-flesh partner, but it will never fully satisfy; it only creates within me a hunger for more. More is found in God. So I would suggest to you the sexual drive is the soul's longing to be intimate with God; that's the only place it's ultimately fully satisfied.

Okay, now the logic of the argument is this: Because of the great exchange, because of the decision *to exchange the glory of an incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man and worship the creature rather than the Creator*, what we said is, "We are not going to limit ourselves to intimacy within God's boundaries. I'm going to find it other places." So sexual immorality is a picture with God and people in rebellion saying, "I'm going to find it my way. I'm going to go outside your boundaries and I'm going to find life as my own god, as my own way of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator." The logic of the argument then goes one more step down the path.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. (Vs. 26-27)

This is one of the clearest passages of Scripture relating to how God feels about homosexual behavior. As a matter of fact, one of the things you can watch for is when a particular text is unclear, people typically say, "I just don't see it that way." But when a text is so abundantly clear, those who want the text to say something different will go to great lengths to try to explain away the text. That's one way you always know it must be *really* clear—because they're really working hard to explain it away. That certainly would be the case in this text. For example, there would be those who would seek to make the case that, while it seems like the text is saying that God is offended by homosexual behavior, that's not really what He's saying. In first century Rome, homosexuality was very common. Within that behavior there was a problem with men having homosexual relations with young boys. Some in the culture agreed with this; some in the culture disagreed with this. This certainly was a problem. Some would say that's what Paul was addressing here. He wasn't really addressing homosexual behavior in general, just that of old men with young boys. But that is clearly not the case. It's simply an attempt to explain away the obvious. Now first of all it's obvious that's not the case because he starts with the behavior of lesbians—women with women—and that was not the problem in first century Rome. So clearly that's not what he's addressing, but more so if you just follow the logic of the argument, that's not what he's talking about. Now I do get somewhat frustrated by the New American Standard, the version I use, that they don't translate the Greek words *male* and *female* because that is exactly what they are. It's meant to connect us back to Genesis 1 and 2. As a matter of fact, if you want to see that, if you go to Matthew 19:4, Jesus quotes Genesis 1, *God made them in the image of God, male and female*. It's the exact two Greek words that are used here. So when you use those terms, it forces us back to Genesis 1 and 2 which I think is Paul's intent.

What he's saying then, in very strong language, is when the female has sex with the female and the male has sex with the male, it goes against God's design. As a matter of fact, the word **unnatural** is literally *against nature*—more literally, *against God's design*. So the argument of the text is: God didn't make people in His image for that behavior. It's contrary to God's design, to God's plan. So here's the logic of the argument: Is God saying, is Paul saying that homosexual behavior is at the top of the list of worst behaviors? The answer is, "No, I don't think that's the logic here." The logic

is this—again we start with an image of God with His people pictured by a husband and a wife. That's the powerful image that God intended. One step down that path pictures God and His people, but His people are in rebellion, outside of God's boundaries. But if you take it one more step, then what you have is God out of the picture and the creature worshipping the creature. God's not even in the picture now. Not only does it go against God's boundaries, it goes against God's design. So God's out of the picture and now it's simply the creature worshipping the creature. That's meant to be a picture of the worldview of where this whole pathway is headed.

In verse 24, verse 26, and verse 28, you have the phrase, **God gave them over**. Basically it means God let them have their way. The wrath of God is revealed in God allowing people to have their way and consequently to live with those choices. There is no way for the human soul to be satisfied, to have what it longs for, apart from a relationship with God. So each step that moves farther away from God has greater consequences. I would suggest to you that as a culture drifts farther and farther from God, the evidence is in the sexual behavior of its people. It pictures God and His people, and then God with people in rebellion, and then God out of the picture...and the creature worshipping the creature.

A couple of comments to think about related to this paragraph. I want to start by kind of setting a certain tone here. Patti and I have homosexual friends. We've worked very hard for those relationships. These are people we genuinely care about and they are people who genuinely care about us. I believe they are very meaningful friendships both directions, so I do believe we have a clear track record that this isn't about hatred. As a matter of fact, I would say I want nothing to do with the theology of hatred. The marketers of the homosexual agenda have worked very hard to mainstream this behavior. This is no secret. There are actually books written, laying out their strategy and they've been incredibly effective at the strategy. They, themselves, would say that part of the strategy was to label anyone who disagrees as, not just someone who disagrees, but they're hateful! They're fearful! They're pro-discrimination. Now come on, let's be honest, none of us like those labels. I don't want someone saying to me, "You're a hate-monger! You're a homophobe. You favor discrimination." We've even gone through this in our own community. The biblical position upon which I will not compromise is not based on hatred; it's not based on fear; it's not based on a desire to discriminate. It is based on one foundational issue. I choose to worship the Creator, not the creature. I choose to embrace the glory of the incorruptible Creator. Because of that, I choose to operate within God's boundaries and according to God's design because, in worshipping the Creator, I—in submission—say the Master is in charge; I'm not. So I embrace His boundaries and I embrace His design. To choose to be sympathetic with a lifestyle outside of God's boundaries and outside of God's design is to contribute to the destruction of people. There's nothing loving about that. So you have to think about the imagery which then takes us to verse 28:

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God...That phrase right there helps us understand that's exactly what the previous paragraph is meant to picture. They, meaning all of us, the behavior described above is simply a picture of what we're all guilty of when we choose to go our own way....And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (Vs. 28-32)

Twenty one vices that flow out of the decision to worship the creature rather than the Creator—to operate outside of God's boundaries and outside of God's design, to reject the glory of the Creator for the image of corruptible man. It is a very accurate description of the world in which we live. It's worth noting that when you look at those behaviors, it is impossible to experience deep community with anyone when those behaviors define your life. We were made as relational beings; we long for community but in the great exchange, when we reject God in order to worship the creature, becoming our own god cultivates within us behavior that makes community impossible. So the farther down the path I go, the more isolated I become, the more lonely I become, the more desperate I become, the more desperate my behavior becomes as I continue down that lonely, rebellious, desperate pathway. We get to the point where no longer do we just involve ourselves in such behaviors, we actually cheerlead such behavior—which aptly describes the culture in which we live.

It is impossible to understand the gospel story if you don't start with an understanding of the wrath of God. It is because God *is* love that God grants people made in His image the right to choose. God doesn't force obedience on anyone, but His judgment is: when you make your decision, you live with your decision and you live with the consequences of those decisions. That's a part of how the wrath of God is played out in this earth. The earth is what it is today because of the choices that we've made. We've taken God's paradise and we've made a mess of it and we all feel the pain and the effects of it every day. That's part of the consequence of choosing to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

As we close this morning, I want to just ask you a question and have you think about it. In an auditorium this large there have got to be those who very obviously have made a decision to worship the creature rather than the Creator: “I'm going to be my own god; I'm going to run my own life; I'm going to do things my way; I'm going to operate outside of God's boundaries; I may even choose to go against God's design. That's my right as my own god.” So this is my question: You tell me, if you continue to stay on that path, where do you think that path is headed?

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Opening Discussion

1. What are some ways Christians today are seeking to help God with His image by recreating Him in their own image? Why do they do this?
2. Is it possible to truly love others and not be moved to anger when those people are abused and hurt in some way? Explain.
3. Why do you believe people in the United States are so receptive to the idea that a God of love could not be a God of wrath? How might people in the Middle East see this debate?

Bible Study

1. Review Romans 1:16, 17. What about the righteousness of God is revealed through the Gospel Story? What are the two sides of the coin?
2. Read Romans 1:18-23. Does God have wrath according to this text? Is this describing an uncontrollable rage or an anger that leads to judgment and justice?
3. What is God angry about according to this text? How do you see this text fleshing out in today's modern culture?
4. Read Romans 1:24-25. Why does God identify sexual sin (impurity) as the result of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator? Why this particular sin?
5. Read Romans 1:26-28. Following the train of thought from question # 4, why does Paul then narrow the sexual sin to homosexuality? What is the symbolism reflecting the bigger picture of his argument?

6. The homosexual activists have a very effective marketing machine that labels everyone who disagrees with them as people who are hateful and fearful and discriminatory. How would you define the real issue as to why Bible-believing Christians disagree with the homosexual lifestyle? How is this real issue symbolic of the bigger issue at play here?
7. Read Romans 1:28-32. These 21 vices are simply a list of the consequences of our choice to worship the creature rather than the Creator. You could say this list of vices (there are many more of course) are the judgment coming from the wrath of God. What does the phrase “God gave them over” mean (v. 24, 26, 28)? How might this “hell” on earth be a picture of the eternal judgment to come? Compare this with 2 Thes. 1:9. If this is true, what would be the likelihood that these same people would beg for God’s mercy or respond to God’s love after death?

Application

1. The next time someone tries to explain away the wrath of God how might this text help you respond in a way that he/she might listen?
2. According to this text what is your greatest temptation? How can you avoid slipping into this trap?
3. How should we view those experiencing the consequences of their choices? Is one sin worse than another? Should we overlook some and condemn others? Discuss the right approach to those who are confused and lost in their own sin.