

**God's Wrath Revealed**  
**Romans 1:18-19**  
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Well, I invite you to turn with me to Romans 1 as we continue our journey through the first chapter of this letter of the apostle Paul to the churches that were meeting in homes scattered all around that ancient city of Rome. Let me read for you the paragraph that we're studying together. It's Romans 1:18 - 23. Romans 1 beginning in verse 18. This is the word of God to us.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 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. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, 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.

This paragraph reminds us that we desperately need the gospel because there is such a thing as the anger of God against human sin. Really, the basic theme of this paragraph is that God's wrath, His righteous wrath, is being revealed against every immoral pagan. Now, let me remind you of how this paragraph fits into the flow of Paul's argument. You remember back in 1:16 and 17 Paul introduces the theme of this letter. The theme is the gospel: the good news that's found in Jesus Christ that God has made a way for man to be reconciled to Him. And at the heart of that good news in verse 17 is this gift of righteousness that God gives to those who believe so that they can have a right standing before Him. The weight of verse 18 and following rests on properly understanding our need for the gospel.

In other words, let me put it to you this way, the extent to which we will appreciate the good news in verses 16 and 17 is exactly equivalent to the extent to which we understand the bad news in verses 18 and following. In fact, let me put it this way. If you can shrug at the gospel, if the

concept and the expression of the gospel sort of bores you, makes you yawn, I can promise you there's one explanation for it. And that's because you don't really understand. You don't really grasp the reality that as you sit here today God, the Creator of the universe, is growingly angry with you. His wrath will someday reach a boiling point, and it will pour across your life like a flood destroying you. That is the message of the Scripture. And if you understand that then the good news really is good news.

And so, before Paul explains justification by faith alone in 3:21 and following, he first shows us the universal need that all men have for the gospel for the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. He does that beginning in 1:18 running all the way through 3:20. He sets out in this section to prove the universal need of man for the righteousness that's offered in the gospel. He presents overwhelming evidence to prove our guilt, to show us we have no hope.

He begins by proving the need of what we could call the immoral pagan. This is the first category of mankind. Before he's done, he's going to deal with all of us, but the first kind of human that he deals with is the immoral pagan. And this is 1:18 down through 32. This is the person who doesn't claim to worship the one true and living God. The key to understanding this section is in verse 23. The people he's addressing in this chapter are described as those who exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God into an image. These are idol worshippers. These are not people who claim to worship the true God. Instead they worship a god of their own making. The pagan's only hope is the righteousness that's presented in verse 17 that comes to us not by works but by faith alone. Why? Because God's wrath is being revealed against him and his sin and rebellion. Look at verse 18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven."

Now, last week we studied the idea of the wrath of God, a concept that is not well understood in today's Christianity. This is the definition that we used (comes from Alan Cairn's book, *The Dictionary of Theological Terms*). He defines God's wrath this way.

"It is the settled opposition of God's nature against evil." [In other words, this is part of who God is. He can't help Himself. He is repulsed by evil, and He has to deal with it. Cairn's goes on to say] "it is His holy displeasure against sinners." [You see God isn't just displeased with sin. He's displeased with those who commit that sin. And, he goes on to add,] "And it is the punishment He justly metes out to them on account of their sin."

Now, if you ask, so what makes God angry? You answer that question simply by saying human sinfulness, evil. And that's true. But Paul is more specific than that. And last week we were more specific than that. We noted last week that there are three responses to God from us that make God angry. Let me just remind you of them. First of all, it makes God angry when we refuse to properly honor His person. Secondly, it makes God angry when we disobey His will and His commands. And thirdly, it makes God angry when we despise His love in the gospel.

The first of those is made clear in verse 21 of chapter 1. "Even though they knew God they did not honor Him as God, they didn't glorify Him as God. That is a failure to honor God's person. Verse 32 is disobeying His will and commands. They know the ordinance of God, and yet, they do what they do anyway. And then in 2:4 and 5 Paul highlights despising His love in the gospel when he says "... do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness ... [intended to lead] you to repentance [to embrace the gospel]? If you disregard the gospel, Paul says, you are storing up for yourselves, you're accumulating wrath in the day of wrath. It makes God angry when we despise His love in the gospel.

Now, go back to verse 18. This is the wrath of God, and Paul says of that wrath "For the wrath of God..." literally "is being revealed" present tense. Now that's an unusual thing for Paul to say. He's talking here about a wrath that was being revealed in his day and is still being revealed today. As we will see when we get to verse 24 and following, Paul is not talking here in chapter 1 about eschatological wrath, that is the wrath of the last days. The tribulation, the second coming, eternal hell. He's not talking about that kind of wrath here although he'll get to that in chapter 2. Here he's talking about a wrath that's happening right now. It can best be called the "wrath of abandonment"; when God abandons a person or a culture or a civilization to their sins. Notice this wrath is revealed from heaven. In other words, it's from God Himself. It is divine wrath. It is wrath that originates from the majestic throne of the Creator of the universe.

Now, that's how he introduces this section, and we need to begin now in light of that to walk through the rest of the text of Romans 1. And it falls into two basic parts. Having introduced the theme of God's wrath, the first part of this section is: why is God's wrath revealed? You see this in 18 down to 23, the paragraph we just read. Why is God's wrath revealed? And then in verses 24 – 32: how is God's wrath revealed? Why is God's wrath revealed? He's going to answer that in verses 18 – 23, and then: how is God's wrath revealed? He's going to answer that in verses 24 - 32.

Now, first of all, Paul anticipates and answers the question, why? Why is God's wrath revealed against immoral pagans? Now last time as I just reminded you we saw that men make God angry for three reasons. In this paragraph Paul deals with the first two of those reasons. In verses 18 - 23 he addresses the two reasons God is angry with every immoral pagan. First of all, his willful rebellion against God's law, and secondly his willful ignorance of God's person. Notice, first of all, Paul's indictment of the immoral pagan's willful rebellion against God's law. Now, if you're thinking with me, when you hear that, you should immediately have a question.

You should be saying, wait a minute; whoa, whoa, whoa, what do you mean willful rebellion by a pagan? How can a pagan rebel against a law he doesn't know? After all most pagans living on the planet today, most who have lived in human history never had a Scripture they could hold in their hands. They never had God's Word. They didn't understand God's law. They never read His truth. This is very important to understand. God says the immoral pagan does know the truth even without having the Scripture in his hands. The pagan knows God's law. Look at verse 32. They know the ordinance of God. They know the requirements, the regulations, the rules of God. And they know that those who practice those things are worthy of death.

So, they know it's wrong, and they know penalty's coming. They know judgement's coming. And yet, even though they know that, notice they choose to rebel against it. Verse 32 goes on to say, "They not only do the same, but they also give hearty approval to those who practice them." So, that invites a really important question. How does a pagan, living in some mountainous tribal area in Papua New Guinea who has to have a missionary dropped in from a helicopter, how do those pagans know God's law? How does the law speak to the billions of people who have never read the Bible both in human history past and even on the planet today? They've never heard it read, they've never heard it taught. How do they know?

Paul masterfully answers that question in Romans 2. Go to Romans 2:12. Here's how they know God's law,

For all who have sinned without the law [that is without the written law] will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the [written] Law will be judged by that law.... [Here Paul breaks down all of humanity into two groups. There are those who don't have the written Law of God and there are those who do have the written Law of God.] ... for *it is* not the hearers of the law ... [that will be justified] before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. [Now watch verse 14.] Now when [pagan] Gentiles who do not have the [written] Law

do instinctively [literally by nature] the things of the Law [what the law requires] these, not having the law are a law to themselves,

In other words, when pagans understand that they should not lie to their friends, when they understand that they shouldn't commit adultery against their spouse, when they understand those basic requirements of God, they are showing [verse 15] "the work of the law written in their hearts." Their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts either accusing them or defending them.

Now what's Paul saying here? He's saying that when those who have never seen the Bible, they've never seen the Law of God, do the things that are written in the Law, and they acknowledge those things to be right and the opposite of that to be wrong, notice verse 15, they show, they exhibit, they give proof of the work of the Law written in their hearts. That expression "the work of the law" is found only here in the New Testament. It means the substance of the Law, the requirement of the law. We could say the essential demands of the law. And Paul says it has been written on their hearts understood by God. They know because God wrote it on their hearts. It's written on the heart of every man.

It is this universal awareness of the Law of God that C.S. Lewis uses for the basis of his argument in his book *Mere Christianity*. Every person is born with the substance or the basic requirements of the Law indelibly printed on his heart. He can mess it up, he can distort it, because of his sinful heart, but there is the essence of what God requires written into the code of his being. And then he has a conscience, and his conscience uses that basic information of what God expects to either affirm him if he does what's right, and his conscience says, "that was a good thing you did". Or if he contradicts what he knows to be right his conscience accuses him, "That was wrong, you shouldn't have done that," and he feels guilt. His conscience makes it clear whether he's keeping or disobeying that law.

Now here's Paul's point: every human being knows God's law because God has written the essence of it into his DNA, into his heart. And every man who knows that rebels against it. Now Paul gets very specific about the nature of our rebellion back in 1:18. He says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Now obviously, this indictment is in a section as I already told you that Paul was addressing the guilt of immoral pagans. But, in reality, this is also an indictment of all men and all women. This verse is an indictment of those who are religious and those who are pagan, those who are moral

in their lives and those who are immoral in their lives, those who are Jew and those who are Gentile. This verse describes all mankind's rebellion against our Creator.

Now notice, Paul says our rebellion against God's Law falls into two basic categories. First of all, there is ungodliness. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness." This word is a vertical word. This describes man's relationship specifically to God. It describes a flawed and sinful response to the one true God. It's a state of settled opposition to God, a refusal to recognize His rightful claims. Now, don't misunderstand. Ungodly does not mean irreligious. In fact, you can be very religious and be ungodly. He's going to make that point in 23 and 25. These people worship. They're very religious, and yet, they're also ungodly. You see the word ungodly describes one who practices the opposite of what the fear of the true God demands. So, he may be very religious, but he doesn't fear the true God and respond to the true God as he ought to.

So, let me kind of make this more applicable in our day. The terrorists connected to ISIS are religious, very religious in some cases. But they are, by the definition of this word, ungodly. Hindu monks are religious but ungodly. Others involved in false religions are religious but ungodly. At the same time the person who lives down the street from you, who denies that there is a God, who acts as though there is no God and lives that way: he is also ungodly.

Now, when we parse "ungodliness" into its constituent parts, it consists of several things. First of all, it is a lack of the fear of God. Ungodliness is a lack of the fear of God. Look at verse 21. For even though they knew God," [and we'll talk about how they knew and what they knew next week, Lord willing,] "they did not honor." Now notice the word "honor" in your NAS has a marginal reference: literally "glorify". The Greek word is the word glorify. They did not glorify Him as God. They didn't put Him in His right place. They didn't respond to Him with the respect, the honor, the fear that He deserves. Turn over to chapter 3. Paul comes back to this when he comes to the indictment of all humanity: 3:11 "THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS," [and then he says really something very surprising] "THERE IS NONE, NOT ONE, WHO SEEKS FOR GOD".

Now, a lot of people think that those who are involved in false religion are seeking God. Folks, they are not seeking God. They are running away from the true God to a god of their own making so they can live the way they want to live. No man seeks by nature the true God. False religion is not a way to seek Him. It's a way to run from Him. Look at verse 18. Here's the real issue. There is no fear of God before their eyes. This is the heart of ungodliness. It's for there to

be a God who gave you life, who sustained you, who gives you every good gift, who keeps your heart beating moment by moment and for you not to fear Him, for you not to respect and honor Him, that is the essence of ungodliness.

A second constituent part of ungodliness: not only a lack of fear of God, but a lack of love for God. You see, the most basic command God has for man is what? To love Him, to love Him because He is worthy of our love, and because it's also for our good to love Him. And so, you come to Deuteronomy 6:5, the "shemah", the great commandment, and what does Moses write? "You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." This is what God most expects of you, demands of you.

You remember in the ministry of our Lord in Matthew 22 on Tuesday of the passion week a scribe comes to Him trying to trip Him up in His words, and he says, "So, what's the great command and the law?" Tries to get him involved in a theological discussion and debate that was going on in the first century. To which Jesus responds, "This is the great command: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your strength." He quotes Deuteronomy 6 and Jesus says, this is His commentary, this is the foremost command of all. This is the chief command. This is the main thing.

And yet ungodliness does not love God. The person who's ungodly does not respond to God in love. In fact, it is the essence of being a Christian to respond to God in love. I love the way Paul defines it. Look at chapter 8. We quote this verse often, but I want you to see it in a little different context. Romans 8:28. "For we know that God causes all things to work together for God to believers" that's what he means. But notice how he describes believers, "to those who love God." To be a true follower of Christ is to be one who loves God. But those who don't follow Christ, those who are not true believers, do not love God. They are ungodly.

There's a third part of being ungodly. Not only a lack of fear of God, a lack of honor of God and a lack of love for God, but thirdly, a lack of the worship of God. This also is foundational of what God requires of us. When God lays out the sort of basic overview of His law in the ten commandments, how does He start? Exodus 20:3, "You shall have no other gods before Me." In other words, you must worship Me alone. And the second commandment, by the way, says and you must worship Me not in a way of your own making but only as I prescribe. You must worship Me. That's part of what we're supposed to do as human beings. But notice what happens instead. Romans 1:23. "Men and women exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for images." They get into idolatry instead. Verse 25, "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie

and they worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever. Amen.”

So, understand then, that every person on the planet knows he should fear the one true God. He should love the one true God. He should worship the one true God, but he rebels against that knowledge. He is ungodly. For sinful and selfish reasons, he does not fear God, but he fears men and other things. He does not love, God but he loves himself. And he does not worship God, but he worships idols of his own making. You need to understand the sin of ungodliness, as Paul describes it here, is the foundation of all other sin. We sin against people because we are ungodly, because we don't love, worship, and fear the one true God the way we ought to. And it is in part for this sin of ungodliness that God will eventually bring His wrath to play on human beings. In fact, turn to 2 Peter, 2 Peter 2. Peter gives a couple of examples from the past of God's judgement coming because of ungodliness. Second Peter 2:5.

“[God] ... did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, preacher of righteousness with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly;” [At the heart of their sin and rebellion against God was ungodliness, their refusal to fear and love and worship the one true God.] Verse 6, “... He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly *lives* thereafter.”

Listen, God destroyed the cities of the plain not only because of their rebellion in the issue of homosexuality, but also and at really the heart of it, was their refusal to fear and love and worship Him and that lead to, as Romans 1 will make clear, that lead to their specific sin. But Peter goes to the future in 3:7 and he says, “By ... [God's] word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire....” [not flood] “.... but fire, kept for the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men.” Those who don't fear and love and worship the one true God. So, understand then, God is angry at ungodliness: our failure to fear and honor Him as we ought to honor Him, to love Him as we ought to love Him, and to worship Him as we ought to worship Him.

But there's a second category of human sinfulness back in Romans 1:18: not only ungodliness but unrighteousness. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness of men.” Now let me distinguish these two words for you. “Ungodliness” has to do with our sin directed against God's person. “Unrighteousness” has to do with our sin directed against God's



Law. Unrighteousness is a lack of conformity in our thoughts, our words, and our actions to God's Law. And ultimately then, to His character because His character is what shapes His Law. As this chapter unfolds, Paul is going to identify a number of sins that pagans engage in that violate God's Law. In verse 24 moral impurity, sexual impurity. In verse 26, homosexuality, but then in verses 29 - 31 he gives a list of sins. One of the vice lists of the New Testament. A whole group of sins that can be characterized as violations of God's Law or unrighteousness.

Now, look back at verse 18 and notice the word "all". That is a very important word because it means God overlooks nothing. There are no expressions of ungodliness, there are no kinds of unrighteousness against which His wrath is not revealed. Now that is so important for us to get because what do we do as humans? We look at someone else, and we say, "Can you believe she did that?" And then we look at ourselves, and we say what? "Well, it wasn't that big a deal." Listen, there is not one sin that you have ever committed against which God's wrath is not revealed, against all ungodliness and all unrighteousness of men. His wrath is revealed against every human sin. If you had only committed one sin in your life it would deserve, and apart from grace get, the wrath of God. So, the first reason God's wrath is being revealed from heaven is the immoral pagans' willful rebellion against God's Law, a rebellion that is manifested in his ungodliness and his unrighteousness.

Now there is a second reason God's wrath is being revealed according to Paul here and that is the immoral pagan's willful ignorance of God's person, His willful ignorance of God's person. And this is the part of his indictment where Paul spends the most time. He summarizes it at the end of verse 18. Notice "men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness," and then he explains it at length in verses 19 - 23. Let's just look at the brief summary this morning. Look at the end of verse 18, "For the wrath of God is revealed against men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." Now, what is the truth to which Paul is referring here? Well, the context makes it very clear. He means the truth about God that is revealed in Creation. Look at verse 19,

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 [specifically His eternal power and divine nature] have been clearly seen. And they are understood by looking at what He has made so that all human beings are without excuse.

There's no excuse. So, understand then what Paul is saying. God has made certain things about Himself known in creation: His existence, His eternal power, His divine nature. And what does

sinful man do in response to what God has made clear to him? Look at verse 18 again. “He suppresses it, he holds it down, he stifles it. He does everything he can to silence its voice in his life. When my kids were young, one of their siblings would often say something they didn’t want to hear. And I’m sure you’ve experienced that, if you have children, or you did this yourself when you were young. When somebody was saying something when you were a kid you didn’t want to hear, what did you do? You stuck your fingers in your ears, and you said something equivalent to “bibble bibble bibble”. Or in the case of my family; I don’t know how this got started. I think my oldest daughter is responsible. She would stick her fingers in her ears and begin singing at the top of her lungs, “Mary Had a Little Lamb”. That is exactly what every sinner chooses to do. He intentionally ignores or even denies what God has made evident about His person. In other words, men are willfully ignorant of God’s person. They know the truth of God’s existence, of His divine nature, and they intentionally suppress what is evident to them, and they act as though they didn’t know it. John Stott writes,

It is not just that they do wrong though they know better. It is that they have made a decision to live for themselves rather than for God and others and therefore deliberately stifle any truth which challenges their self-centeredness.

Now, why do we do this? Well, look again at verse 18 for the answer. “Who suppressed the truth in unrighteousness.” Paul could mean we suppress the truth by our unrighteousness. But I think the best way to understand this: we suppress the truth we know about God and His law because of our unrighteousness because we love our sin. We want to do what we want to do, and so we suppress the truth. No wonder God is angry with men for their ungodliness that leads to unrighteousness. Folks, this is why we and immoral pagans need the gospel: because God is angry with our ungodliness and our unrighteousness with our suppression of the truth He has revealed to us.

But the God of wrath and anger (and here’s the good news) is also a God of grace. He’s a God of grace. I never get tired of thinking about defining grace. I hope you never get tired of hearing it. You know what grace is? Grace is a quality in God’s character that causes Him to delight not just to do, but to delight in doing good to those who deserve exactly the opposite. That’s grace. And, moved solely by His grace, God made a way to satisfy His just wrath against our ungodliness and our unrighteousness, and He did it by pouring out the full fury of His anger on a willing substitute, our Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, nowhere is the wrath of God more clearly revealed, or more powerfully displayed, than on the cross when He turned His back on the Son of His love. And God has told us what He has done to satisfy His wrath in the gospel. So folks, the gospel is extraordinarily good news. In fact, turn with me to Romans 5, Romans 5:6. It's good news for the ungodly because verse 6 says, "For while we were still helpless,..." [that is morally helpless, spiritually unable to do anything] "... at the right time Christ died for" [He died on behalf of] "the ungodly." Those who didn't fear God, who didn't love God, who didn't worship God, He died on their behalf. And because He did that look back at 4:5 because of the work of Christ in his life and death "... to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." It is the complete satisfaction of God's wrath against all ungodliness and unrighteousness at the cross that we celebrate in the Lord's table.

Our Father, we thank You for Your amazing grace to us in Jesus Christ. Lord, may we never get over that. Help us to remember what You have saved us from. You have saved us from Yourself, from Your justice, from Your wrath that we deserve. We thank You, oh God, that our Lord drank the full cup of Your wrath to the dregs so that there's not a single drop left for us who are in Christ. May we leave here with Your praise in our hearts and on our lips. And may we live in light of what You've done.

Father, we pray for those who may be here this morning who still live under the reality of Your looming wrath. May this be the day when they flee to Christ, when they run to Christ to be saved from Your wrath.

We pray in Jesus name, Amen.