

Romans 1:18-20

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[0:00] We are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. So, upon completing this statement, in Paul's very logical way, He loops back to the beginning to help us understand mankind's need of salvation.

Our need to be justified. Our need to avoid the wrath of God. This gospel he's not ashamed of, because it's the power of God for salvation.

He wants us to be very clear what we need to be saved from. Now, we're going to speed up our study a bit and spend today and the next Lord's Day finishing up chapter 1, Lord willing.

But I do not want the lessons of verses 18 through 32 to be lost on us. At the conclusion of our study of this chapter, you ought to either feel a great condemnation for your lost state, and, I pray, will flee from the wrath to come to the mercy of Christ, or you ought to feel an abundant, overflowing gratefulness, having already received Christ's mercy in the salvation of your soul.

So, Romans chapter 1, verse 18 through 23. Let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's word to us. It was written for his glory and our good, and so we would do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

[1:36] And Paul goes on, For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Some weeks ago, I pointed out the logical progression of Paul's writing. Paul's writing is full of fours and therefore, one assertion building on the next.

[2:49] I like preaching Paul because I'm a very linear thinker. I don't like making lots of loops, so I enjoy this kind of writing. We saw one four at the beginning of verse 16 and another at the beginning of verse 17.

And here we see one at the beginning of verse 18, 19, 20, and 21. As we proceed through chapter 1, we see a therefore at the beginning of verse 24 and two fours in verse 26.

All of these are just the fours and therefore that begin in verse 16 through the end of the chapter. I'm just pointing this out to you simply to show you the logical progression of Paul's case.

Don't miss the fours. This is the way he most regularly wrote, and it's the way he most regularly preached the gospel. We can read in Acts chapter 17, verse 2 and following.

And Paul went in as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ.

[4:07] Now, Paul wasn't exerting his own ideas, right? He was reasoning specifically from the scriptures, from the Old Testament text. He was taking up the word, and he was clearly, with some logical progression, explaining the need, right, for Jesus to suffer and to rise from the dead.

Why did he do it in this way? He spoke to their minds with the scripture with the intent of getting through their minds by the power of the Spirit to their hearts.

He was just simply using ordinary means that God might do something miraculous in the lives of his hearers. And we see this to be the case.

In fact, Luke records it for us in verse 4 in this way, and some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. So why take the time to do such a thing? I'm just trying to say to you that it is good for us to engage our minds, whether you find yourself in Christ or not this morning, whether you want to be here or somehow got drug here, it is good for you to engage your mind in the argument that Paul here is making.

[5:23] It is our prayer that he might do something miraculous, the Lord, in your life as you think about these things. Paul progresses neatly from one assertion to the next, which is why for today I don't have points for the sermon.

I'm just going to follow his four format throughout the text, beginning in, of course, verse 18. He says, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

In verses 16 and 17, remember that Paul states that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. For in it, verse 17, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.

As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. So in verse 18, he begins his explanation of why anyone would care that the gospel is the power of God.

He begins telling us why we need the righteousness of God that comes through faith. He doesn't just assume that we know it.

[6:35] Power of God for salvation, right? The righteous shall live by faith. He begins to rewind and begin to make the case that we are not righteous by ourselves and we need a righteousness that comes from God.

God's righteousness. The reason, he tells us, is the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.

It's something to be afraid of. God's wrath seems to be a very unpopular idea in modern evangelicalism. But Paul's inspired writing offers up as the very first reason someone would receive the truth of the gospel is the fear of God's wrath.

He begins there. Now, God's wrath is not the same as the kind of uncontrolled venting of anger that we are likely to exhibit. Rather, it is a determined indignation.

God justly feels angry at sin as it is an offense to him. It's an offense against him. It is bad for us and it wreaks havoc for others.

[7:54] It is objectively wrong. And so, therefore, God has a determined indignation against sin of every variety.

God's wrath is righteous wrath. And it does not detract from his loving kindness. Rather, it magnifies his mercy and grace as all of his divine attributes are held in perfect balance.

We have to be careful as we open up the word and look at our God that we don't over-inflate one aspect over another. They're all held in perfect balance. This is the doctrine known as the simplicity of God, although it may be a bit misleading of a term.

It means he's always who he is all the time. All things at all times. He's not given to fits of emotion like we are.

He is not swayed by whims. Listen to just a few texts that speak of God's wrath. Psalm 90 in verse 7 through 9.

[9:01] Isaiah chapter 9 and verse 19.

Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts, the land is scorched. And the people are like fuel for fire. No one spares another.

Jeremiah chapter 7 and verse 20. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground.

It will burn and not be quenched. Unless you think that this was only an Old Testament reality, maybe fall victim to the error to think that our God has changed from Old Testament to new.

God's wrath was a major part of Paul's theology. We see it here just in chapter 1 of this tome of Paul's writing. Here are two other texts that proceed from Paul's hand.

[10:21] Ephesians 5 and verse 6. Let no one deceive you with empty words. For because of these things, the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

In Colossians chapter 3, verse 5 and 6. Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these things, the wrath of God is coming.

God's wrath is a settled reality against sin. He is a just God and He justly does and will punish sin. Whether or not you realize it, you want God's wrath to exist. You want justice to be served. It is proper that Kim Il-sung and Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein and Vladimir Lenin and Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

If you don't know who these people are, you need to know who these people are. Many of them are socialists, as a note. It's proper that they're punished for the heinous crimes that were carried out by their commands and at their hands.

[11:45] We want justice to be done, right? Beyond our power and beyond our control, we want justice to be established. We want a God that sets these atrocities right.

But if we understand the nature of our sin, if we get that our sin is the rejection of God as creator and king, that our sin as just as grievous, then we will understand the deserved wrath against all sin.

God, because He's just, must punish sin. He is perfectly just, right? He's not like any judge that has ever lived, right?

He doesn't dismiss some things and punish other things. He is perfectly just. He always rightly judges sin. He must do it or He ceases to be God.

And this is a good, good thing. If you haven't placed saving faith in the personal work of Jesus Christ, then you will pay the penalty for your sin.

[12:57] You will endure God's wrath forever. And this is just. Think it not unfair. It is the good and proper thing for our God to do.

If you have placed saving faith in the personal work of Jesus Christ, then He, Jesus Christ, paid the penalty for your sin. God maintained His justice in punishing your sin in Christ, that you would be set free from its penalty and its power.

This is the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. And it is the core of the gospel, right? Astoundingly in our age, there's debate amongst, I will say, in quotation fingers, Christian circles about this doctrine.

If you dismiss penal substitutionary atonement, Christ died in our stead in order to satisfy the wrath of God that was aimed at us, then you're denying the gospel altogether.

Each and every one of us deserves God's wrath. If God were to be entirely fair, we would all be consumed in a moment and then punished forever.

[14:12] This would be the right thing for Him to do. But because of His loving kindness toward us, He sent His own Son, that His Son might live the life that He expected of us and die the death that we deserved.

So that in that gospel belief, all who believe in that gospel, the power of God, we would be granted the righteousness of God, right? That we would be justified, that we could stand before God forgiven.

And note that God's wrath does not discriminate, right? As I've made the point already, it is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

These two words, ungodliness and unrighteousness, are very similar in the Greek language. They are almost but not quite synonyms. The first stresses a severed relationship with God.

The second focuses on the activity that proceeds from that severed relationship. The one on whom God's wrath is revealed is not living as an image bearer of God, but in contradiction to that created purpose.

[15:35] And in so doing, suppresses the truth. Presses down the truth. Now, Paul is going to continue to develop our understanding of the fallen nature of man and the deserved wrath for those apart from Christ until halfway through chapter 3.

But before we move on from this verse, we need to note something that will have bearing on our study in coming weeks. This will be important and increasingly important.

Paul states, The article before reveal, the article is, it's not in the original language, but it's properly added into our text as the verb translated revealed is in the present form, which means that not only will God's wrath be revealed, but it is currently being revealed.

That the unrighteousness are presently under the judgment of God and will, apart from saving faith, be under the judgment of God forever. It's currently playing out in the world in which we live.

We will need to understand the profundity of this verb, understand the rest of the chapter and, frankly, the world that we live in and into the rest of our text.

[17:11] The wrath of God revealed from heaven against ungodliness and unrighteousness. He goes on in verse 19, right?

The for here is referring to the suppression of truth. For what could be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them, right?

Here's the truth suppression happening. Sinful man denies the truth that God has revealed to them and so, he'll go on to say in verse 20, they are without excuse.

Now, I like the translation that we preach from. This is the English Standard Version. Many, many years ago, we decided to pick a translation to preach from in the hopes that others would have the same.

And if you don't, that's entirely okay. There are many good translations out there. But I'll tell you, when we made that decision, it was hard for me because I had an NASB 95 that I really enjoyed a lot.

[18:13] And it was difficult to give it up as the primary preaching text. And so I'm always eager to confer with my NASB 95 and see the way those translators rendered some of these texts.

And it's not always helpful, but in this case, I thought it was particularly helpful. Listen to the way they rendered these Greek phrases. They say, verse 19, That's fascinating.

Those Greek phrases can also be translated in that way. ESV says about God is plain to them, right? Here, they root it with the evidence that's actually put within us.

And Paul's going to develop this idea later in chapter 2, I believe. So what could be known about God is plain to them or is evident within them, for God has shown it or made it evident to them.

For, verse 20, right? He's developing this even further. For God's invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

[19:33] So, they are without excuse. Two things can be clearly observed in the natural world. One, Paul says there is a creator God.

Whether we know exactly who that creator God is as revealed in Jesus Christ or not, we know by looking at nature that there is a creator God. And two, that He is eternally powerful.

And everybody seems to know this in our age, which is a suppression of the truth. So, let me read to you just a bit.

This is from John MacArthur's commentary on this text. He gathers a lot of stats together in just a way that I don't have time for. So, I'm going to read what he gathered together. I'm not sure he had time for it either, but I don't want to suggest I'm busier than John MacArthur, but I'm going to lean on him and the commentary here at this point.

Listen to some of the things, right? There's just some examples of things that can be observed, things that display our God as a creator God and eternally powerful. At any given time, there are an average of 1,800 storms in operation in the world.

[20:52] The energy needed to generate those storms amounts to the incredible figure of 1.3 billion horsepower. By comparison, a large earth-moving machine has 420 horsepower and requires 100 gallons of fuel a day to operate.

Just one of those storms, producing a rain of 4 inches over an area of 10,000 square miles, would require energy equivalent to the burning of 640 million tons of coal to evaporate enough water for such a rain.

And to cool those vapors and collect them in clouds would take another 800 million horsepower of refrigeration working night and day for 100 days. I don't know how he figured that out.

It's pretty incredible. Agricultural studies have determined that the average farmer in Minnesota gets 400,700,000 gallons of rainwater per acre per year, free of charge, of course, and my addition is for now.

The state of Missouri has some 70,000 square miles and averages 38 inches of rain a year. That amount of water is equal to a lake 250 miles long, 60 miles wide, and 22 feet deep.

[22:01] God blesses with rain, is the point. The U.S. Natural Museum has determined that there are at least 10 million species of insects, including some 2,500 varieties of ants.

There are about 5 billion birds in the United States, among which some species are able to fly 500 miles nonstop across the Gulf of Mexico. Those are hummingbirds, by the way, that can do that. Mallard ducks can fly 60 miles an hour, eagles 100 miles an hour, and falcons can dive at speeds of 180 miles an hour. The Earth is 25,000 miles in circumference, weighs, I don't, this is an astounding number, how we figure this out.

Let's say approximately, 6 septillion, 588 sextillion tons, I don't even know what those numbers mean, and hangs unsupported in space. It spins at 1,000 miles per hour with absolute precision and careens through space around the sun at the speed of 1,000 miles per minute in an orbit 580 million miles long.

We get our seasons from that astounding reality. The head of a comet may be from 10,000 to 1,000,000 miles long, having a tail 100,000,000,000 miles long, and travel at a speed of 350 miles per second.

[23:18] If the sun's radiated energy could be converted into horsepower, it would be the equivalent of 500,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 horsepower. Each second, it consumes some 4 million tons of matter.

To travel at the speed of light across the Milky Way, the galaxy in which our solar system is located, would take 125,000 years. And our galaxy is but one of millions.

The human heart is about the size of its owner's fist. An adult heart weighs less than half a pound, yet can do enough work in 12 hours to lift 65 tons one inch off the ground.

I think he's talking about the... Never mind. I'll make that more confusing if I say what I think he means. A water molecule...

I love this one. A water molecule is composed of only three atoms, but if all the molecules in one drop of water were the size of a grain of sand, they can make a road one foot thick and a half mile wide and would stretch from Los Angeles to New York.

[24:23] Amazingly, however, the atom itself is largely space, its actual matter taking up only one trillionth of its volume. Except to a mind willfully closed to the obvious, it is inconceivable that such power, intricacy, and harmony could have developed by any means but that of a master designer who rules the universe.

It would be infinitely more reasonable to think that the separate pieces of a watch could be shaken in a bag and eventually become a dependable timepiece than to think that the world could have evolved into its present state by blind chance.

It is just statistically impossible that we exist apart from a creator God and there's so much to be observed in the world around us.

If we are not suppressing the truth, we will realize there is a creator God and you can call that God whoever you want that God to be. I'm telling you, it's the God of the scripture.

And so we should listen to what he says because he's eternally powerful and he's either going to pour out his wrath on you or he's going to grant you the power of God for salvation.

[25:39] Right? No one, the end of verse 20 tells us, will have an excuse. No one can now plead ignorance or will be able to plead ignorance on the day of judgment.

It will be impossible. God will say, I showed you what you needed to know, that I existed. Donald Gray Barnhouse, this is the quotation on your bulletin this morning, said, will God give man brains to see things and will man then fail to exercise his will toward that God?

The sorrowful answer is that both of these things are true. He goes on to say, this wouldn't fit on your bulletin today, God will give man brains to smelt iron and make a hammerhead and nails.

God will grow a tree and give man strength to cut it down and brains to fashion a hammer handle from its wood. And when man has the hammer and the nails, God will put out his hand and let man drive nails through it and place him on a cross in the supreme demonstration that men are without excuse.

Paul goes on to develop the sinful thoughts and how they lead to sinful behavior in man. And as I note the time, I think we're going to pick up these last verses in more detail next week.

[27:07] Yeah, we are. Right. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. So just briefly note these last three verses and then we'll look at them at greater length next week.

Note the progression. The worship of God neglected, the futility of their thinking, the foolishness of their hearts, the idolatry of their actions.

The worship of God neglected, the futility of their thinking, the foolishness of their hearts, and the idolatry, misplaced worship of their actions.

Dear listener, have your part in this text to be only who you once were. We all have to identify this with this text in some way.

[28:19] My hope is that it'll only be to identify it in who you once were. Do not let it be said of you today that you are a futile thinker, a foolish-hearted idolater upon whom the wrath of God lies.

The one who made you offers to you salvation this day if you would simply come to him for mercy. Ezekiel 33, 11 says, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked would turn from his way and live.

Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die? If you only find yourself in this text to be who you once were, then don't we have great reason this day to rejoice in the saving work of Jesus Christ on our behalf?

As we meditate on that who we once were, we know that it is only by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone that we are not the very worst of sinners.

sinners. So until next week, let's pray that these verses will rightly affect our understanding of the good news as it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

[29:49] Let's pray together. Let's pray together.