

The Wrath of God

by Sinclair Ferguson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the biblical diagnosis of man's plight, which is the ultimate seriousness of sin and its effect on God, and the revelation of God's wrath in Scripture, at the Day of Judgment, and in this present time.

Duration: 29:50

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 3:36, Romans 1:18-28

Topics: "Wrath"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the wrath of God and how it is revealed throughout history. He emphasizes that the passage in Romans 1:18-28 describes human nature and exposes the sinful heart of man. The preacher highlights that God gives men up to their sinful desires, leading to impurity and dishonoring of their bodies. He also mentions the connection between God's love and mercy in the Lamb of God and His judgment and anger, emphasizing the importance of not turning our backs on God.

Transcript

That passage we read this morning together in Romans chapter 1 must surely be one of the grimmest passages in the whole Bible, and I don't suppose any normal person really enjoys reading verses like these. And yet it's a profoundly important passage if we are rightly to understand the glory of the gospel of which Paul has been speaking in these introductory verses 16 and 17 of Romans chapter 1, and to grasp something of the marvel and wonder of what God has done for us in the gospel of Christ. In fact, a true understanding of what Paul is saying in this part of Romans 1 and through chapter 2 and in the first half of chapter 3 is really as important for a true grasp of the gospel as a true diagnosis is for a doctor.

You see, there are two prerequisites if a man who is very sick is going to be brought to health. One is that the doctor must make a thorough and accurate diagnosis. I can remember Dr. Lloyd Jones saying once when he was preaching in Glasgow that Lord Horder, to whom he was at one time a clinical assistant and who was one of the great physicians of his day, used to drum into his students in St. Bartholomew's Hospital a phrase that all of them learned off very quickly when they became his students, and it was this, the doctor who fails in diagnosis fails everywhere.

And that's the primary thing, a thorough and accurate diagnosis. But the second prerequisite is that the diagnosis must be accepted by the patient. Because, you see, there are people who will just refuse to believe that such a serious thing could conceivably go wrong with them.

I have known several people like that. They may listen to everything that the doctor says, but deep down they just refuse to believe it. And so they live under the delusion that the treatment they need is perhaps less radical than he says.

Now the question which arises as we come to this passage this morning is, what is the biblical diagnosis of man's true plight? What is it that lies behind the glory of this gospel of which Paul says he is not ashamed? Well, there are all sorts of answers that people would give to that question. Some might say, with some truth, well, what puts me in need of a Savior, and particularly of such a Savior as Jesus, is that life is difficult and uncertain, and I need a guide and friend through life. And that's not a bad answer to give.

Others might say, I find a sense of need in my heart, an emptiness, a frustration, a restlessness, and I believe Christ could satisfy that. That, of course, is so true. Others might come nearer the heart of things and say, I need a Savior because of my sin.

I need pardon and cleansing and deliverance from its power. But you know, none of these is the ultimate reason that man needs the gospel and man needs Christ and a Savior like the Savior Paul is expounding in this epistle to us. The ultimate answer is in the first verse of the passage we read this morning, verse 18 of chapter 1. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

That is man's ultimate plight, and Paul comes to it right at the very beginning of the main part of the epistle to the Romans. It is, you see, not just that man has to discover that he is a sinner, because even after we have discovered that, so often our real concern is about what sin does to us or what it possibly does to other people, and I have seen people so often in my time in the ministry distressed and brokenhearted about both of these things, about what sin has done to them and the wreckage it has left in their lives, and about what sin has done in their families and in the lives of other people and the wreckage it has washed up into their lives. But you see, the thing which makes sin serious is not what it does to me or what it does to others ultimately.

It is what it does to God, and what the apostle is saying is that the ultimate seriousness of sin is that it calls down upon it and draws down upon it the active wrath and anger of a holy God. That's the ultimate seriousness of sin, and that is ultimately what makes it a serious thing to be a man or woman without Christ. The ultimate seriousness you see of being without Christ is not that you will be less happy than you would be with Christ.

The ultimate seriousness of being without Christ is that there is no shelter anywhere else in the universe from the wrath of God except in him. That's the unpalatable truth to which the apostle is introducing us here, and it would be very easy for us to dismiss this whole concept because we don't very much like the idea of it. But let me draw your attention to the one word in verse 18 that is repeated from verse 17, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.

In other words, the wrath of God is a fact which God has revealed to us just as surely as he has revealed to us his love. From heaven, God has revealed the reality of his wrath and anger against sin. Where is God's wrath revealed? Well, it is obviously revealed first of all in scripture, and that of course is the only reliable place to learn about God or about life or about salvation or about Jesus or about the gospel or about anything that concerns our eternal welfare.

The only reliable place to go is the place where God has revealed the truth to us. Now you see, this is what makes it such a dangerous and not a casual or harmless thing for people to say, but people often say, well now I don't like to think about God like that. That's all very well for him or for people who have that kind of bias, but I don't like to think about God like that.

Here's how I like to think about God. I like to think about him like this. And then they describe to you the picture they have of God.

You see, my dear, dear friends, it doesn't really matter very much at all what kind of way I like to think about God. What matters is truth. Nothing else matters but truth.

And the man who is suffering from some mortal disease and says, I like to think that everything is going to work out all right, is living under a gross delusion. For what matters is truth. And this is what God has revealed to us in his word.

Now perhaps one of the reasons we find this idea of God's anger so difficult is that we imagine that God's anger is the same as ours, and anger in human beings is really a very unpleasant thing normally, is it not? Because it usually speaks about a loss of self-control. That's normally what happens when someone is angry. We speak about flaring up, and it's a description of a loss of self-control.

We have gone out of ourselves. We have lost our control of ourselves, and when you see that in human lives and human families, it is a most ugly thing. But God's anger in Scripture is not a fitful passion.

It is a settled, unchanging disposition and attitude which God has to everything that is not holy. It is the revulsion of his holy nature, and God's nature is constant. His eternity speaks of this fact that God is unchanging.

One of the things the Catechism says of him, he is unchanging, and he is unchanging always in his attitude to and reaction towards everything that contradicts his holiness. This is what God's wrath is. Specifically, it is set against all ungodliness, verse 18, and unrighteousness as it ought to be translated of men.

Ungodliness is the deranging of our relationship with God. Unrighteousness is the resultant disorder in all our other relationships, whether with ourselves or with other people. Now, Scripture is absolutely clear and speaks with one voice.

Let ungodliness and unrighteousness bring down God's anger upon us. That is a fact of Scripture which you cannot possibly avoid. That is why when you open the book of Genesis and find that when man has turned in rebellion against God, he pours out his righteous judgment and wrath upon them in the coming of the flood.

That's what Genesis 6 bears witness to. In the days of Abraham, when Sodom and Gomorrah had turned themselves to unrighteousness and ungodliness, then God speaks, albeit as it seems to Abraham with a broken heart, but he speaks of the revulsion that is on his spirit against all this ungodliness and unrighteousness, and he pours out his fire upon these cities. Now, that fire is the fire of God's anger.

Now, the whole history of God's dealings with men in Scripture speak of this, and if you think it is an Old Testament concept, and people have often said that's the picture of the Old Testament idea of God and Jesus came to tell us something different, let me read you the words of Jesus. John 3, 36. He who

believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

And the whole history of God's judgments throughout Scripture speak of this, so that you discover some of the fiercest things that are said about God's wrath being said from the lips of Jesus. Where is the wrath of God revealed from heaven? It's revealed in Scripture, but of course the ultimate place where the wrath of God will be revealed is on the Day of Judgment, which is called in the second chapter of Romans, verse 5, the Day of Wrath. But by your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the Day of Wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Now, that of course is what makes the Day of Judgment such an appalling prospect, you see. And some of the most fearful things again that are said about that Day of Judgment are said by Jesus. Now, while those who are in Christ are appointed not to obtain wrath, but final salvation through Jesus Christ, yet the picture we have in the book of Revelation is a picture of the Lamb of God who was slain, who now is at the right hand of the Father in glory and shares the throne, because as heaven opens and they look into heaven, they see the Lamb seated there and all the elders and all the multitude of God's people are worshipping and praising and blessing the Lamb who was slain, for he is the center of heaven's glory.

But oh, there is another side to the Lamb, have you read it? There is a picture of the Lamb in Revelation chapter 6 and verse 15, listen to it. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong and every one slave and free hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, some who are desiring to see its face in order that they might glory in the beauties of the Lamb, others who are saying to the rocks, fall on us, to the mountains, fall upon us that we may be hidden from the face of this one. And listen, fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of his wrath has come and who can stand before it? How do you see how God brings together the picture of this intense love and mercy that he has in the Lamb of God with the full fury of his judgment and anger, the wrath of the Lamb? And this is not just an impersonal matter, it is apparently the personal indignation and anger of God against sin.

So, the place where the wrath of God is revealed is in Scripture at the day of judgment. But the wrath of God is thirdly revealed in this present time. This is really what Paul is saying in this passage and we tend to forget it.

That the wrath of God is being revealed, it is revealed throughout the whole of history and it is being revealed in a certain way here in this appalling catalogue of human sin and debauchery which you find in Romans 1 from verse 18, the sort of thing Keith Robery was saying to me in the vestry, one almost turns away from reading such an appalling passage as this. But it is a passage that describes human history, beloved. It describes human nature.

It exposes to us what is in the heart of man. Do you notice that three times over in this passage, Paul speaks of God giving men up. Notice in verse 24 and 26 and 28, therefore God gave them up in the lust of their heart to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie.

Verse 26, for this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. And verse 28, and since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. Now what God is doing you see is this.

In his wrath, he is taking his restraining hand off men's lives and sometimes off the whole of society to expose sin and show the world what is really in the heart of man. And God's anger against sin is often expressed in this way, the apostle is saying, primarily against this one thing. Notice how often it occurs in this passage that when they knew God, verse 21, they did not honor him as God.

That is, even in the creation where men were able to see something of the glory and greatness and power of God, they stifled that knowledge and they refused as far as the revelation of creation and of nature would lead them to honor and acknowledge God. They stifled that knowledge and they did not honor him. They exchanged, verse 23, the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Now that's idolatry of course. And let none of us say this morning, oh well this is a rather primitive society and we are not given to that kind of idolatry. Beloved, idolatry is worshipping something other than God.

Idolatry concerns what is first in your life. Idolatry means robbing God of his glory and giving that honor to something else or to someone else. So let us not look down upon these primitive people worshipping birds and beasts and so on, because idolatry is simply putting something in the place of God.

So, verse 25, they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator. Now that ultimately is what calls down God's anger. When men worship and serve the creature rather than the creator.

Now look at this in verse 26, for this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions, their women, their men, and so on. Now you see, when you go through that catalog, we would all reply, almost all of us, well I don't behave like that, and of course the great majority of us don't. But I want to say to you this morning that although this is not universal human behavior, it is universal human nature.

And that is what gives weight and point to the phrase that so often tritely drops off our lips. You know the phrase that means next to nothing most times we say it. When we see somebody in precisely this position that the epistles of the Romans chapter 1 is describing, we say, ah well, there but for the grace of God go I. And mostly we don't really believe that.

But my beloved, that is nothing else than the sober truth, you know. Because this may not be a description of universal human behavior, but it is a description of universal human nature. And it all has its roots from ungodliness.

What do you think, for example, was the crucial point in the prodigal son's descent into the gutter where he fed the swine and longed to feed with them? Do you think the ultimate depth and nadir that the man reached was when he was down there in the pigsty? It wasn't at all, you see. It wasn't at all. The crucial moment for that boy was when he turned his back on his father.

And from that point there was nothing out of the question for him. And that's what's really serious about turning your back on God. And the wrath of God is revealed in society when God takes his restraining hand off the lives of men.

And we are beginning to see it in our society in our day, men and women. We are beginning to see it in the crass display of indecency and violence and disorder of every kind in the world. And sometimes it is the evidence of a holy God displaying his anger by taking his restraining hand.

I sometimes wonder, going through Glasgow, what would happen if God in his holy judgment had to take his hand utterly off the city? But there is one other place where the wrath of God is revealed. Would you be surprised if I told you that it is revealed more than anywhere else in history or in the universe? At the cross. This is the amazing thing about the gospel, and it is to this that Paul is going to be leading up as he expounds this gospel to us in these next chapters.

It is that there is no place in all heaven or earth where the wrath of God has been so revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men as when our Savior hung upon Calvary and experienced what it was to go out into the outer darkness from which he cried, my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? That reality that was projected into his soul in Gethsemane when he shrank from this, not from suffering, from physical anguish. What was it that our Savior shrank from? In Gethsemane, as he said, this cup, Father, the cup that he saw before his eyes which he was to drink, if it be possible, let it pass from me. Well, now, that cup is very clearly defined in Scripture.

In the prophets, it is the cup of the wrath of God, the cup into which his anger is poured, which men must drink if they will be unrepentant. It is the cup of God's wrath in revelation, and Jesus drank it as he bore our sins. And that's where you see the wrath of God.

Isn't it striking that there is no place in heaven or earth where you see the love of God more radiantly than in the cross of Jesus? And there is no place where you see the wrath of God in all its fullness but in the cross of Jesus, because what was being poured out upon him was the wrath of a holy God against my sin. And that's what makes the gospel so utterly amazing, and the love of God so astonishing. That's why we sing, amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, should die for me? Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! O Christ, what burdens bowed thy head! My load was laid on thee, Jehovah's sword awoke against thee.

My dear friends, Calvary will never cut into your heart in all its reality until you have grasped and accepted what Jesus bore there for you. And the need of a needy world, respectable and deuce though it may be, will never burn itself into your being until you have grasped what Jesus came to reveal to us. A love that was beyond our understanding and a wrath that was beyond our measuring.

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