

The Gospel as it Really Is: Romans Simply Explained

Romans 1:18-32 / Psalm 103

The Anger and Patience of God

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Introduction

A few years ago, a Christian relative of mine who lives in the south told me this story. She had been involved in planning a Christian gathering; choosing the songs, and so on. Someone chose “In Christ Alone” - a widely recognised modern hymn classic. But a local religious leader strongly objected to words in the second verse:

*'Til on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied*

This man did not want everyone to sing about the “wrath of God”, he asked for the words to be changed! I wasn’t told the reasons for that man’s objection to mentioning the wrath or the anger of God, but I can think of reasons why people may be uneasy about referring to God as wrathful or angry.

Human wrath. Perhaps they grew up with an angry parent and they associate the emotion of anger with bitter childhood experiences of human anger—and the thought that God may be like *that* is unbearable.

Faulty doctrine. Perhaps they have been taught the common western error—that the God of OT might have been vengeful but the God of Jesus & the NT is not like that. This is an error on two counts; for not only is the God of the OT not vengeful, the God of Jesus is the same God as the OT: Jesus often spoke about wrath and judgement.

Idolatry. Or perhaps the reluctance to acknowledge the wrath of God is due to the age-old human habit of making God fit our ideas, to neglect what we don’t like about him and accept only what we do. The Bible calls this practice idolatry.

Whatever the reasons, no-one who wants to be honest to Scripture can avoid the wrath or the anger of God. And no church making their way through Romans can fail to preach it. Last Sunday we came across these words Rom 1:

*“The **wrath of God** is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.” (1:18-19)*

There it is, “the wrath of God.” What does Paul mean? “The anger of God is being revealed from heaven?” How is God's anger being revealed from heaven?

What is God's wrath?

Four truths every Christian should know, wrath of God:

1. God's wrath is the natural, inevitable, reaction of the holiness of God against sin. God is absolutely righteous, pure: “holy, holy holy is the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6). His “eyes are too pure to look on evil.” (Habakkuk 1:13). But the world is filled with wickedness, the 22 sins of Romans 1 for example: God's wrath is the inevitable reaction of a holy God to sin and injustice and evil.

Think of a metal bar heated to 1000 degrees. Plunge it into water. What happens? Bubbling steam erupts from the surface: the very nature of things demands it.

In the same way the steam of God's wrath is his natural reaction when faced with wickedness. If the metal was cold, there would be no steam. If God was not holy, he would not get angry! He gets angry because he is holy.

Praise God that he is holy and righteous; praise God for his holy anger!

2. God's anger is always pure. This is where many people trip up; they associate God's wrath with impure human anger! All by itself human anger is a good and holy emotion. God gave us the emotion of anger. But human anger is tainted with impure elements like vindictiveness, excess, unkindness and impatience.

I remember my gentle mother coming to me as a teenager in tears one day, apologising that she had been too harsh in her discipline towards me. (I really think she was being oversensitive because I was not the best behaved son; but she felt her anger had in some way been contaminated.)

But God's anger is absolutely pure, without impatience, totally measured, utterly patient.

We read: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger (Christian fathers, is this not what you should aspire to?) abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever;" (Psalm 103)

3. *God's anger always includes judgement.* What do I mean? God's wrath is more than an emotion, it always includes action; and that action is judgement. After listing some sins the apostle Paul writes in Colossians 3:6, "because of these the wrath of God is coming." Paul's talking about hell, the place of judgement. God's anger always includes judgement. So we could paraphrase Romans 1:18 like this, "The *judgement* of God is being revealed from heaven."

4. *God's wrath can be passive as well as active.* And finally, God's wrath can be passive as well as active. The *active wrath* of God is when he openly punishes men and women for their sin:

- When the world became polluted with sin, after 120 years of patience, *God sent a flood* to destroy all humankind except for 8 people. That is God's active wrath.
- When *Sodom and Gomorrah* had sunk to the depths of depravity, God destroyed the cities with fire. God's active wrath.
- One day in the future, at the end of the day of judgement, God will assign the unrepentant wicked to the flames of *eternal hell*.

But, and this is the point Paul is making in Romans chapter 1, God's anger and judgement can also be passive.

If a teenager is not listening to his or her parents, let's say about the friends they're hanging out with. Mom and dad are angry—righteously so—that their child is hanging out with the wrong crowd. It's a legitimate concern, for "bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33). There are two ways to express that anger, passively or actively.

Actively—they may decide to ground the child for a week, or whatever

Passively—or they may decide to allow their child to bear the consequences of their actions. “If you want to do that go ahead but you will discover bitter consequences” The hope is that they will learn through some difficult or painful consequence of hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Passive wrath is what Paul is talking about in Romans 1: God judges humanity by allowing it to experience the painful but inevitable consequences of their sinful actions.

Which takes us right to Romans 1, and three sober truths I want to share this morning:

1. God's passive wrath is at work in the world today

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

How is “the wrath of God being revealed” in the world today? Cities aren’t being destroyed with fire from heaven? God’s *active* wrath is not being worked out. But his passive anger is everywhere to be seen.

When people suppress the truth of God and fail to glorify him and thank him and say to him, “I don’t want you in my life, I want to go my way,” God just lets them go. And the mess they get themselves into is the passive wrath of God against sin. Three times Paul says that God gave them over:

“Therefore God gave them over” (v.24)

“Because of this God gave them over...”(v.26)

“Furthermore, since they did not think it worth while to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done” (v.28)

“You want to live your life without me? I will let you go, but you will have to face the bitter consequences of your actions.”

The young prodigal son was determined to walk out on his loving father. What did dad do? Let him go. What happened? The young boy made foolish mistakes - squandered his wealth, made all the wrong friends—and paid the price for his folly and ended up in poverty looking after pigs.

Everywhere in the world we see the passive wrath of God being worked out:

- A husband or wife decides to be unfaithful in their marriage. The heartache and destruction that follow is the passive judgement of God
- A young man takes substances that harm his body, and the tragic foreshortening of his life is the passive judgement of God
- In verse 27 Paul gives the example of homosexual practice, “..*people received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.*” (verse 27 Perhaps an effeminate nature or a sexually transmitted disease are the passive wrath of God on sin)
- Men and women do not forgive one another. War, the tragic outcome of hatred, is the passive judgement of God.

Everywhere we look across the world, we see the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

2. God's (active) wrath will be revealed in the world to come

“They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out of the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” (2 Thess 1:9)

“The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. (Revelation 14:19)

Hell, is the place where God's active wrath against unrepentant sin is worked out. It's a place of “darkness” (2 Peter 2.17) where “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is heard (Matt. 25.30). Hell is “a lake that burns with fire and sulphur” (Rev. 21.8), a prison of everlasting chains from which there is no hope of release (Jude 6), a furnace of conscious torment where the fire never goes out (Matt. 13.49-50), a place of misery where the worm does not die (Mark 9.47-48), a place of agonizing thirst that can never be quenched (Luke 16.22-24).

Can you see why we need the Gospel? The Good News the book of Romans will unfold little by little? Because you and I, young and old, male and female, all of us, are sinners who stand under the wrath of God, all of us deserve his righteous judgement.

The Good news, and with this we must end, is that...

3. Jesus rescues us from the wrath of God..

In love, Jesus rescued us by allowing the wrath of God to be re-directed from you and I, towards himself:

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24)

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6)

He took my sins and my sorrows

He made them his very own

He bore the burden to Calvary

He suffered and died for me

How marvellous, how wonderful

Is my Saviour's love for me:

What is God doing today? Why does he not hasten the final day of his wrath? *“He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)*

Today God is calling you home, urging you to repent, to turn around, to flee from the wrath to come.

Many of us have heard his call and responded by believing in Jesus and turning from our sins. But what about you? May God give to each and every one of us the gifts of faith and repentance today. Amen.