

The Wrath of God

Rich Nathan
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New Albany Fellowship
Romans 1:18-32

Michael knew that I haven't preached for a few months, so he generously eased me back into preaching by giving me 2 really simple topics - the wrath of God and homosexuality. Now there's nothing controversial about either of these two topics. It's not like these two things are hot potatoes in the church, or anyone might be offended by anything that I could possibly say today. It's not like these two topics will offend anyone living in the 21st century. So, I just wanted to begin by saying thank you, Michael, for giving me this text.

Because this text is so dense and takes time to unpack, I'm going to jump right in and read it beginning in Romans 1:18-23

[SLIDE #1] 18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

[SLIDE #2] 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. [Romans 1:18-23, NIV]

Now, the text should begin in verse 18 with the word “for.” Paul says, “For the wrath of God is being revealed.” By the way, this is the way this verse is translated in the ESV, the NASB, the RSV, and the old King James version of the Bible. The text begins with “For.” It’s a connecting word. The NIV, unfortunately, has neglected the word “for.” Paul says, “For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.” The reason I make such a big point about this connecting word is because Paul is connecting verse 18 and what he says about the wrath of God with what he previously said about the gospel in verses 16 and 17. Let’s read verses 16 and 17 that Michael preached on last week.

[SLIDE #3] 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” [Romans 1:16-17, NIV]

You see, Paul is saying that the gospel, and especially the death of Christ on the cross, is amazingly good news. Why did the Apostle Paul celebrate the gospel? Why did he spend his life preaching the gospel? Why was Paul willing to be beaten for this message? Or to be imprisoned for years? Or to be stoned, to be chased from city to city and ultimately, to have his head cut off outside of the city of Rome? Why would anyone today leave the comfort of America and become a missionary in a difficult place? Why would anyone allow themselves to be inconvenienced? Why even be embarrassed by letting people know that you're a Christian? Or by attempting to share this gospel message with someone who does not yet know Christ? Why give money or pray that someone would receive Christ? Why is the gospel necessary? You see, Paul is going to spend the next four chapters telling us about the necessity of the gospel and how amazing the gospel is. But first, we have to understand why we need the gospel.

[SLIDE #4] Why is the gospel necessary and amazing?

You can't understand the necessity or how amazing it is, unless we set it against the wrath of God. And that's what Paul is going to be talking about in Romans 1:18, all the way through chapter 3:20. Why do we need the gospel? You see, it boils down to how we diagnose the essential problem that our world is facing. What do you think our biggest problem is? Because if we don't properly diagnose the problem, we're going to offer inadequate solutions. For example, if the problem we have is ignorance, then the solution is better education. If the

problem we have is a lack of opportunity, then the solution is going to be greater access and fairer laws. If the problem is poverty, then the solution is more money and economic reform. If the problem is addiction, then the solution is going to rehab and recovery. If the problem is poor self-esteem, then the solution is self-affirmation and encouragement. But the Bible says that the fundamental problem of all of humanity, for all of human history, is not merely ignorance, or addiction, or injustice, or our lack of discipline, or our lack of self-esteem, or broken systems, or trauma. The Bible says that the essential problem is something called sin.

The Bible describes sin not simply as something we do, Sin is also something that's done to us. Sin is like a virus that infects the environment that we live in. Sin is the polluted water that we're swimming in all the time. It infects every system that we create and every institution that we engage with. And sin is not just outside of us, something we breathe like secondhand smoke. Sin is also inside of us. Sin stains every fiber of our being. It's like washing a white shirt with a red sock. Everything comes out pink. Sin is like leaky sewer pipes in our home where you just can't get away from the stench. Sin infects not just institutional systems. Sin infects us. It's in our minds. It's in our hearts. It's in the fabric of our DNA.

And because the problem is sin, the solution cannot simply be education or therapy or self-discipline alone. Education can inform us. We need education.

Therapy can help us. We need to learn how to cope. Changes in our laws can bring about a measure of justice and restore dignity to people. But, only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from this stain of sin. And only the gospel can deal with the essential problem of the wrath of God. So Paul connects verse 18, the wrath of God, with what he said before, in verses 16 and 17 about the wonders of the gospel. The gospel is necessary because God's wrath against sin is real!

Now I want to tackle the issue of God's wrath by answering three questions.

First, what is God's wrath? Second, why does God show wrath? Third and finally, how does God reveal his wrath? Let's start with the first question, then:

[SLIDE #5] What is God's wrath?

It's really important that we not conflate our understanding of God's anger with human anger. God doesn't fly off the handle. He doesn't lose his temper. God is never malicious. He's never spiteful. He's never abusive. He's never vindictive. Most human anger has at least some wounded pride involved, or animosity, or desire for revenge. Somebody offends our vanity and we get angry. Somebody inconveniences us by driving too slowly on the road and we give them the finger. God is not like that. He's always, always, always perfect love. So, how does God's love connect with God's anger? Whenever you read about the wrath of God, we have to remind ourselves that the God of the Bible is perfect love.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian from Yale. His father was a Pentecostal pastor in Volf's native country of Yugoslavia. Here's what Volf wrote in a wonderful book titled

[SLIDE #6] *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace.* [Miroslav Volf]

Here's what Volf said.

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. Then exactly why is God wrathful against some of them?

My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was the casualty of war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I came. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed, and over 3 million were displaced.

My village was destroyed. My people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry about this.

Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in 100 days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath, but instead affirming the perpetrators'

basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love; God is wrathful because God is love. [Miroslav Wolf]

Brothers and sisters, the opposite of love isn't anger. The opposite of love is indifference - not caring at all. When you love someone, you hate what hurts them. Let me tell you a true story. I knew a young woman who was abusing drugs. One day, her mother was going through this young woman's purse, and she found a bunch of pills. She held up the pills to her daughter and said, "What are these?" Her daughter was mortified, but she just remained calm, and said, "They're pills." And her mother said, "Oh. Okay." And Mom put the pills back in her daughter's purse and walked away. This young woman said to me, "At that moment I knew my mother hated me." If her mom really loved her, she would have done something. She would have screamed. She would have grabbed the pills. She would have said, "What are you doing? You're killing yourself. We need to get you into rehab. We need to do something about your addiction!" But her mother did nothing.

For those of you who are parents, when you have a child, you can't believe how much you love that child. Now, imagine if someone deliberately hurt your child. An adult molests them. A drug dealer hooks them. Your child is repeatedly picked

on at school because they have a disability. They're denied a job or a place in college because of racism or sexism. How would you feel? You feel angry! Anger is not a contradiction of your love. Anger is a confirmation of your love.

[SLIDE #7] Why does God show wrath?

I want to follow Paul's logic here. He is describing a spiral of descent. Paul says, here's why God is angry. Let's just follow the steps. First, because,

[SLIDE #8] God speaks the truth to everyone.

Let's read verses 19 and 20..

[SLIDE #9] 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

[Romans 1:19-20, NIV]

You see, Paul says that God speaks through creation. Now, it's really important to understand that creation doesn't offer us a full disclosure of God, or an exhaustive disclosure. We don't know Jesus simply by walking through the woods, or by enjoying a sunny day. We don't know God's moral will in detail by

standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon and being awed by its beauty. We don't know the plan of salvation by sitting on a beach and watching the waves roll in, or by camping in Africa with the gorillas. God's plan of salvation is revealed specifically in his son Jesus, and in the Scriptures. This kind of revelation is called special revelation. God speaks in a different way than through nature. God's natural revelation is called general revelation. It comes through creation, not by studying God's word, but by studying God's world.

The Apostle Paul is saying here that all of us can know something about God simply because of the natural world around us. According to verse 20, everyone can know God's eternal power and his deity. In other words, we can infer the existence of a Creator simply by examining creation. We can know this Creator is powerful beyond all imagination. And that this Creator is wise beyond all comprehension. The universe has an intelligent design to it. It didn't just pop into existence.

Think with me for a moment about the power of God. Let's just consider one of God's creations, our sun. Now, if you took Earth science in ninth grade, you might remember that our sun is an average-size star. It's a kind of a middle class star. It's not particularly elite and it's not at the poorest end of the stars. It's just sort of in the middle. So if you think about the most powerful thing that human beings have ever created, a hydrogen bomb, this mediocre star called the sun releases the power of 2 billion of them every second. Over the course of a year, our sun

releases the power of 60 quadrillion hydrogen bombs. And remember that scientists tell us our sun has existed for 5 billion years. So, you can multiply that 60 quadrillion times 5 billion. And then, let your mind stretch even further, and realize that scientists estimate that there are one followed by 24 zeros number of stars in our visible universe. You start multiplying all of those zeros and you're not even close to imagining the power of God.

The point is, that we can infer God's power by considering creation. We can infer God's beauty by considering the beauty of creation. We can infer God's infinite size by considering the immensity of the heavens. We can infer God's intelligence by considering the order of creation. God has spoken to everyone about who he is through what he has made.

But here's the second thing: even though we know the truth, we pretend we don't.

[SLIDE #10] We pretend to not know the truth.

Bertrand Russell, the atheist philosopher, was once asked, "What would you do if when you die, you ended up meeting God? Since you denied God your whole life, what would you say if you turned out to be wrong and there was a God, and you met him?" And Russell responded this way,

I would say to God, “You didn't give me enough evidence. There wasn't enough evidence to believe that you exist,” [Bertrand Russell]

Many people in the 21st century say the same thing. God, if you'd only presented us, the jury, a better case, we would have rendered a verdict in your favor. But you offered a weak case for your existence. And so, we're voting against you. There's just not enough evidence.

But this isn't just a modern argument. The Apostle Paul tackled our objection 2,000 years ago in Romans one. He says, “We know the truth.” Verse 19.

[SLIDE #11] 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

And verse 21

[SLIDE #12] 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

And verse 28

[SLIDE #13] 28 Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.

So, again, here's the logic: God speaks the truth to everyone, and, number two, we pretend to not know the truth. So why does God get angry? Because the Apostle Paul says,

[SLIDE #14] We suppress the truth.

We are like people who duct tape our eyes shut and claim the sun is not shining. We put our fingers in our ears, and claim that God is not speaking. Let's read verse 18

[SLIDE #15] 18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness [Romans 1:18, NIV]

We claim to be simply assessing the evidence for or against God objectively. We imagine ourselves in a courtroom, where we're sitting as the judge, listening to the evidence for and against God. On the one side, there is the prosecutor presenting evidence against God's existence, against God's goodness, against

God's power, against God's beauty, against God's intelligence. On the other side is God's great defense attorney arguing for God's existence, for God's goodness, and for God's intelligence.

And there we are, sitting above it all in the judge's box, coolly, dispassionately, objectively, weighing the evidence. But the whole Bible, and this text in particular, tells us that the image we have of ourselves as objective judges is a total and complete self-delusion. We are more like a southern, all-white jury during Jim Crow assessing the guilt of a black man, who is accused of assaulting a white woman. We don't care what the evidence is. We've already made our decision the moment we saw the color of his skin. We're like a southern all-white jury who's being asked to assess the guilt of a Ku Klux Klan member accused of bombing a black family's home. We don't care what the evidence is. We're predisposed to acquit that white man. We have our thumbs, Paul says, on the scales of justice. We sinners are biased against God. We're not objective. We have a selfish interest in making sure that God doesn't speak too loudly to us. Because if we really listened to God - if we took our fingers out of our ears and took the duct tape off of our eyes - then we might have to change. And that's something we are simply unwilling to do. So we suppress the truth.

Suppressing the truth is really a very descriptive view of what we do with truth. We hold it down. We push it under the surface, so it doesn't pop up and come into our awareness. We pretend that we're not conscious of what God is saying

to us - what he wants of us, what his will is for us. We simply can't figure it out. If only God would speak more loudly!

The picture that came to my mind is this: have you ever floated on one of those inflatable blow up rafts? Maybe you go to the beach and you've got one of these big rafts and you blow it up. Have you ever tried to hold an inflatable raft under the water? It takes a lot of effort. That's what we're like with the truth. It takes all of our effort to push the truth down so that we're not fully conscious of it. But, the moment that you let go, the raft floats to the surface. And the same thing is true regarding the truth. The moment you stop exerting pressure against the truth, it will bubble to the surface of your mind. You'll become aware of it.

That's what psychoanalysts say is happening with our dreams. Whenever our control is stripped away - for example, when we're asleep - things start coming to the surface of your mind, perhaps through symbols or pictures, warnings and frightening images. Whenever we find ourselves in crisis, the truth starts coming to the surface. We face a death. We have a bad diagnosis. We're arrested. Crises can bring us to the end of our control. Whenever we face a moment of unbelievable beauty. You stand under a star-filled sky. You hold your newborn child. You realize that there's got to be something more in this universe than just atoms and matter. There must be a benevolent being who gave me this gift of a child. The truth pops to the surface when we're quiet and we're not filling our head with noise. We start thinking about the truth regarding ourselves, the truth

regarding our failures. That's why so many of us have to constantly fill every waking moment with noise. Scrolling online, playing video games, watching movies, taking drugs, drinking. Because if we just stop pushing the truth down, it would come to our consciousness and we would feel bad.

God speaks the truth to everyone. We know the truth, but we pretend we don't, and we suppress it. And the third step down is,

[SLIDE #16] We justify our sin, intellectually.

Verses 21-22

[SLIDE #17] 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools

[Romans 1:21-22, NIV]

Our sinful wills are strengthened and supported by our corrupt minds. So we start reasoning against God holding us responsible for the way that we relate to him. We claim that we are not responsible for our sins. We've intellectually devised a million ways to avoid our own responsibility. We believe that we've got airtight alibis whenever we face what is wrong with us. "You have to understand. I had no choice for what I did or didn't do, or what I said or didn't say. I'm a really good person. Sure, I acknowledge I'm not perfect. But, you know, we're all just human.

We all make mistakes. You see, the problem is my genetics, I'm not responsible before you, God, because I'm genetically predisposed to do this thing you're telling me not to do. And besides, I struggled with attachment - I never really attached to my mother. I had a problem with my father. The trauma experienced by my ancestors caused me to react this way, because as the experts say, the body keeps score. On top of this, I'm not as bad as my sister. I'm just trying to live my truth, but you just have a way of triggering me. Yes, I did that. But you triggered me and this is my coping mechanism. I'm just trying to unlearn the toxic standards that I was raised with. God knows I have a good heart. And anyway, I was raised like this. I'm just the kind of person who..." By the way, when somebody starts a sentence with "I'm just the kind of person who," it doesn't matter what comes after that. You know that no good will come. We have a million ways of justifying our rebellion against God. which leads to the fourth step down:

[SLIDE #18] We turn creation on its head.

Let's read verses 23 to 25.

[SLIDE #19] 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

God makes himself known through creation. We pretend to not know the truth, but instead we suppress the truth. We justify our rebellion intellectually, and the result is the undoing of creation. We turn creation on its head. Look at this with me in verse 23 again,

[SLIDE #20] 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Here we have the threefold breakdown of the animal kingdom from Genesis 1, birds and animals and reptiles. Very similar, but there's one important difference from Genesis 1. Instead of the created order that God designed with human beings ruling over the birds and animals and reptiles, as we reject God, as we suppress the truth that we know about ourselves and about God, creation is turned on its head and human beings, rather than ruling over creation, begin to serve creation.

And in turning creation on its head, we do that not only through idolatry - worshipping and serving creation - but the Apostle Paul says we turn creation on its head through immorality - and that's where his discussion in verses 24 to 27 about sexual immorality and homosexuality comes in.

[SLIDE #21] 24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

[SLIDE #22] 26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. [Romans 1:24-27, NIV]

Listen, this is an important topic. I've put on the back of your outlines four books that you can pick up. If you're at all interested in a longer conversation about this, we're going to do a brief meeting after our service next week and just tackle what the Bible says about same-sex relations and what it doesn't say. The Bible doesn't speak to us about the civil rights of gay people. There's nothing in the

Bible about whether gays should have the right to marry or to be free from employment discrimination or housing discrimination. The Bible doesn't address ultimate causation regarding sexual orientations. The Bible doesn't address how or why we have sexual feelings. What we simply read here that we need to contend with in our sexually liberal society is this basic principle: Sex is God's good gift meant to unite one man and one woman in a lifelong covenant of marriage. We see this plan for sex when God created the first man and the first woman. Sex is meant to bind a man and woman together in a faithful, lifelong marriage. When we practice sex outside of God's designed purpose, we turn creation on its head. But this requires a much longer conversation, and we're going to have that after the service next week, which leads to the very last point:

[SLIDE #23] How does God reveal his wrath?

And this is what we see: God reveals his wrath by not intervening in our lives.

Three times in this text, we read the frightening words, "God gave them over."

[SLIDE #24] Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. [Romans 1:24]

God gave them over. Verse 26,

[SLIDE #25] Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. [Romans 1:26, NIV]

God gave them over. Verse 28,

[SLIDE #26] Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. [Romans 1:28, NIV]

In other words, the way that God reveals his wrath in the world mostly is by letting us have what we want. One of the kindest things that God does is to intervene and to stop us from pursuing our own way. God's intervention is not God's wrath. God's intervention is God's grace! It's God's grace when God allows us to be arrested, when we're stopped by getting a DUI or when we are picked up for dealing drugs. When an affair is revealed, when God allows us to get pregnant out of wedlock, when we are corrected and confronted, we think, "Oh, that's the wrath of God." No, that's the fatherly discipline of God. That's God's love being revealed.

The wrath of God is revealed when God says, "You keep rebelling against me, despite my warnings to you. You keep pursuing your own way, and pushing through every boundary I've created. What I'm going to do is let you have what

you want. If you want this relationship, even though I've warned you about it and spoken to you, if you insist on it, I'm going to let you have it and you're going to experience all the consequences of that relationship. I've spoken to you about this or that behavior a hundred times, but you keep pushing through my warnings. I'm going to let you have what you want." And the result of that, of course, is we experience bondage, we experience heartache, we experience all the things that God wanted to protect us against.

So where does the gospel fit in? We've talked about God's wrath and this cycle of descent. The gospel is the wonderful good news that through the death of Christ, God has exhausted his wrath. He's paid the price. He's borne our sins by sending his Son. to die the death that we should die, to suffer in our place. And the result of God's wrath being exhausted, we experience God's welcome. Judgment fell on God so that grace could fall on us. Because Jesus bore God's wrath, we can receive God's embrace!

The Wrath of God

Rich Nathan

1/25/2026

New Albany Fellowship

Romans 1:18-32

I. Why is the gospel necessary and amazing?

II. What is God's wrath?

III. Why does God show wrath?

A. God speaks truth to everyone

B. We pretend to not know the truth, instead we suppress the
truth

C. We justify our sin intellectually

D. We turn creation on its head

IV. How does God reveal his wrath?

Books on same-sex relationships:

1. Does the Bible Affirm Same-Sex Relationships? Rebecca McLaughlin
2. Does the Bible Support Same Sex Marriages, Preston Sprinkle
3. Washed and Waiting, Wesley Hill
4. Single, Gay and Christian, Gregory Coles