

Understanding God's Wrath

Text: ROMANS 1:18-32

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INTRODUCTION. Shortly after I heard the gospel of Jesus Christ during my sophomore year at Penn State, I joined up with a Bible study. The group was doing a study through the Book of ROMANS, and I have to admit that the Book of ROMANS was difficult for me understand at that time.

Part of the reason I had difficulty comprehending the Book of ROMANS was because my understanding of the meaning of God's wrath was incomplete. I always viewed the wrath of God as a future event that comes at the end of our lives. I viewed it as sort of a final judgment that everyone must experience. According to my understanding at the time, the most severe expression of God's wrath was eternal damnation in hell. But, I understood that there was also a less severe form of wrath. Being raised a Roman Catholic; the concept of Purgatory was strong in my mind. To me, Purgatory was a place where people had to go before they went to heaven. It was a place where the wrath of God would be experienced for a period of time, and the length of the time depended on how many unconfessed venial sins a person had committed at the time of his death. I understood a venial sin to be a less serious kind of sin. Telling a white lie would be an example of a venial sin. With the exception of a very few saints, I thought that everyone had to do at least some time in Purgatory before they got to heaven.

AN INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING. So my concept of God's wrath was pretty much something that would be experienced either in hell for eternity or in Purgatory for a period of time. In either case, it was something that would only happen in the future, after we die. It never crossed my mind that God's wrath is something that people can actually experience before they die.

The good and bad things that happened to people—things like being killed in a war or being killed by some illness or accident or natural disaster—those things were always mysteries to me. I could not understand why those things happened to some people and not to others. There did not seem to be any direct correlation between the bad things that happen to people and their good and bad behavior. So if someone were to be struck by a bolt of lightning

and die, I would have never concluded that it was the wrath of God that had struck the person down.

And, I never equated the punishment people received at the hands of other people for crimes they had committed as being a form of God's wrath. When I thought about certain people in jail, I sometimes thought that those people got what they deserved. At other times I thought that the people didn't get what they deserved. But, I never viewed such punishment as God's wrath. In my mind, wrath was no ordinary kind of punishment. It was a special kind of punishment. It was a kind of punishment that meant much more than just physical suffering and physical death. More than anything else, it meant spiritual suffering and spiritual death. And, I thought that it was only meant to be experience after we leave this earth.

Even after I asked Jesus to be my Savior and Lord, I still thought that God's wrath was something that could only be experienced after death. I gladly accepted the doctrine that I no longer had to worry about experiencing God's wrath. I had my ticket to heaven, and nothing could take it away.

I denounced the notion of Purgatory, and I replaced it with another concept that, even today, I do not fully comprehend. It is the concept that, instead of experiencing God's wrath in Purgatory, believers will be subject to a different kind of judgment where they will receive rewards based upon their performance while here on this earth. The Bible teaches that everyone—even believers—will be judged after death ([2 CORINTHIANS 5:10](#); [ROMANS 14:10](#)). Even though the blood of Christ guarantees those who have been born again a ticket to heaven after they die, there will be some kind reward or lack of reward in heaven based upon things done while on earth.

Now, the problem with this new way of thinking is not so much that it is wrong. The problem is that it is not complete.

It is not wrong to belief that a person can know he will go to heaven when he dies. It is possible to know that. And, even though I cannot explain exactly how it will happen, it [is] Biblically sound to say that

believers will be judged in some way after they die. But, to just believe in those two things is not enough. In fact, it can be down right dangerous.

Feeling confident that they have their ticket to heaven, some people are willing to give up whatever extra rewards might have been theirs in heaven just so they can do what they feel like doing on this earth. Some people don't worry about God's wrath because they believe they are now immune from it. So they make bargains with their own lives, thinking that there is little risk involved. They think about the earthly price that might have to be paid if they get caught. And, they think about the heavenly reward that they might have to forfeit. And then, they figure that it might be worth doing the wrong thing if those are the only things at stake, especially if it makes one's life here on this earth a lot more fun and a lot more bearable.

This kind of reasoning is dangerous, because it is based on an incomplete understanding of things. First of all, it fails to take into account that assurance of salvation should never be based on a decision made by us. Instead, it must be based on a witness that comes from the Holy Spirit ([1 JOHN 3:24](#)). The Holy Spirit never deceives, but we can deceive ourselves. Many people who think they are going to heaven will be in for a surprise after they die ([MATTHEW 7:22-23](#)).

So, we need to think about the possibility of self-deception. And, we also need to think about the nature of genuine assurance. **When the assurance of our salvation is genuine it will produce righteous living ([1 JOHN 3:3](#)).** There are no exceptions to this rule.

When Janiene and I first got married, we were focused on our goal of going to Taiwan. We had no desire to buy a house or buy a lot of furniture or accumulate a lot of wealth like our peers, because we were going to Taiwan to serve as missionaries. Our assurance of where we were going influenced the way we lived in the present by causing us to want to cut back on earthly possessions and pleasures.

And, our assurance that we are going to heaven should influence us to resist making bargains with evil just so we can receive earthly possessions and pleasures and be happy during our brief stay upon this earth.

So, it is dangerous for us to assume that we are immune from God's wrath, because we might be deceiving ourselves. And, there is a good chance that we are deceiving ourselves if we are making bargains with evil. But, there is another reason why it is wrong

to assume that we are immune from God's wrath, and that is because we aren't. None of us are immune from God's wrath, because God's wrath is not just something that will happen to people after they die. It is something that people experience in the present. The evidence of God's wrath working in the lives of people before they die is all around us. For years, whenever I saw someone doing a bad thing, I thought it was bad or sinful behavior, but I never viewed it as being an expression of God's wrath.

WHAT IS GOD'S WRATH. The breakthrough came for me in the fall of 1974. At that time I was making a second attempt at studying the Book of ROMANS. And, the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see that the wrath of God is very much a present and dynamic force that is active in my life and in lives of everyone around me. From that moment on, the way I looked at myself and other people changed.

Please join me in reading [ROMANS 1:18-33](#). I would like to use this passage of scripture to explain in more detail the way my thinking changed.

The first thing I would like you to see from this passage of scripture has to do with the nature of God's wrath. The language is clearly in the present tense. God's wrath is not something that is just going to be revealed in the future. It is something that is being revealed now. The wrath of God is a principle at work in the universe and it is a principle that can be observed by anyone discerning enough to acknowledge it and honest enough to admit it.

It is a universal principle at work in every person who suppresses truth, regardless of what that person professes to be. I believe that [ROMANS 1:18](#) gives us a definition of sin that is extremely transferable.

God's Truth and Wrath. While serving as a missionary in Taiwan, I quickly discovered that the definition of the Chinese word for sin was very narrow in its scope. I found out that, when the average person heard the Chinese word for sin, they thought about violating civil law. So when I told the average person that he was a sinner, what he heard me saying was that he was a criminal who had committed some felony against his government. I quickly learned that I had to be very careful in the way I talked about sin. Basically, I learned to not use the word at all while talking to non-Christians. Instead I decided to use [ROMANS 1:18](#).

Without using the word "sin," [ROMANS 1:18](#) gave me a way to talk to people about sin that they could understand and accept. In order to suppress truth,

one must first be confronted with the truth. The entire logic of the Book of ROMANS begins with the assumption that everyone has the capacity to know truth and has been confronted by truth.

When Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" he was standing face to face with the most clear and perfect and complete revelation of truth man had seen since the dawn of history. Why didn't he see it? Perhaps it is because he was too blinded to see or too proud to admit or too powerful to care or too bored to bother. But, to use those reasons to excuse Pilate's inability to recognize the plain truth when he was face to face with it is a moral cop-out. The real reason why Pilate could not see the truth was because he had suppressed the truth all throughout the course of his life. When and how he suppressed truth? I don't know. Perhaps he started young. Most people do. But, at some point, he took truth that was clear and plain to him and he decided to ignore it. Step by step he suppressed truth until he eventually became the intellectual skeptic and immoral politician that history now portrays him as being. No single choice determines who we are.

What are some of the ways God makes truth plain to us? One way is through the created universe. Another [second] way is through special revelation of God—the Bible. And, the third way is through the Person of Jesus Christ. Since all these categories are truth, they can all be suppressed.

Suppressing God's Truth. Now, the thing which is so condemning about [ROMANS 1:19](#) is not the fact that people fail to know all truth. No man knows everything about God. Some men know much and others know little. Sometimes people apologize to me, because they don't know much about the Bible. But, God never condemns us for what we don't know.

The thing that is so condemning about [ROMANS 1:19](#) is its contention that there is no man who knows nothing about God. At some point in the life of every person who has ever lived on this planet some truth has been clearly revealed and clearly understood. Translated quite literally, verse 19 says, "God has manifested it (truth) to them and has made it plain in them."

This kind of logic denies that there is such a thing as true atheism. Those who claim to be atheists, at one point in their lives, started with God and then somehow managed to successfully rationalize Him from His throne. The book of ROMANS does not debate the fact that all men have some truth. That is not an issue. It is assumed. The real issue is what people

have done with the truth that they have.

And, the argument of ROMANS is that people have made a choice. They chose not to worship the truth that was made plain to them. They chose not to worship God. [ROMANS 1:23](#) says that they "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator..." All of the emphasis in verses [21-23](#) is on decisions made by people. They are decisions to suppress truth.

God's Wrath. In response to man's decisions to suppress truth we see God's decision. God chooses to give them over in the sinful desires of their hearts. To say that God has predetermined any man for damnation gets the cart before the horse. The things that God has predetermined are the moral principles of the universe. No man is free to choose anything outside of those moral principles. But within the context of the moral principles, choices can be made and they are made. God declares the limits and bounds of all choices with reward for obedience and wrath for disobedience.

So, "wrath" is seen as man suffering the consequences of his choices by exercising his moral freedom. Since this wrath is something that first affects what is on the inside of a person, we have to use figurative language to describe it. The phrases used in our text to describe this wrath all have to do with the heart and the mind. The mind becomes futile or useless and the heart becomes darkened. This is something that God is doing in response to man's suppression of truth. This is God's wrath. It is an inner change that must happen to a person whenever that person chooses to suppress truth.

Of course, every inner change is going to have outward expression. A person who suppresses truth finds himself in a state where his heart that can no longer feel correctly and he finds himself in a state where his mind that can no longer think accurately. What happens, then, is that God gives that person over to the condition in which he finds himself. God does not hold a leash on people. He allows them to behave in unrighteous ways that reveal the condition of wrath existing in their hearts and in their minds.

Homosexuality. Paul's discussion of homosexuality is in the context of what happens when people are given over to a condition of the heart and mind created by many choices to suppress truth over an extended period of time. It is a picture of people caught in a web of their own weaving.

Most of what you hear in the news about

homosexuals these days misses the point made in ROMANS 1. And, the point is this: when a man satisfies his sexual desires with another man or a woman satisfies her sexual desires with another woman, what is happening is an expression of God's wrath. It is deviant, perverted behavior that is based on something other than truth.

And, that is not to say that most people who practice such behavior made a conscious decision to reject the truth about God's intention for man-woman relationships. My guess is that most people who practice such behavior never even heard the truth that we try now so hard to communicate in pre-marital counseling. But, they nonetheless have suppressed truth. At one time in the life of a certain person who practices satisfying his sexual desires with a person of the same sex—at one point in the life of that person—there was a choice to disobey a plain moral command of God that he clearly understood. Refusal to obey began a process of intellectual deterioration. Absolutes that are essential to logic were slowly but surely taken away. The original truth that was suppressed eventually is forgotten and the individual concludes that his condition is something he was born with.

One time, while visiting a man serving a life sentence for murder I was shocked to find out that he had no remorse. He thought there was nothing wrong with taking the life of another person.

When I first began to understand the meaning of God's wrath, Janiene and I were ministering in New York City. At that time, New York provided a good environment to help me understand the truth about God's wrath. For a period of time we live with a Catholic priest named Bruce Ritter. Bruce was starting an outreach to young women who had sold themselves or had been sold into prostitution. They were slaves. He eventually created a shelter for these young women. He called the place "Under 21." Anyone over twenty-one years of age was not permitted to enter. It was a strategy to keep the pimps from entering and reclaiming their property. Bruce tried to save young women from the slavery of prostitution, but later on he admitted that most of what he did was a failure. And the reason why it was a failure had little to do with his attempts to provide food and shelter and clothing and counseling and protection. It had to do with hearts and minds of the young women who no longer had the capacity to think and feel the way they were originally created to think and feel. When they were babies, who would have ever thought they would grow up to be prostitutes. But, they did. And, their becoming prostitutes was a

process that took place one step at a time. Is it possible that a young child choosing to take a cookie from a cookie jar when she has been told not to by her parents... Is it possible that such a choice can result in her eventually becoming a prostitute? The logic of ROMANS concludes that it is very possible.

RETURNING TO GOD. What does it take to bring a person back again? There is a simple answer to that question, and there is also a much more difficult answer. The simple answer is the gospel. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring a person back, because only the gospel has the power to save.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

For the wrath of God is being revealed.

Unfortunately the translators of the NIV Bible decided to leave out a very important conjunction in verse 18. The reason why the Apostle Paul is so excited about the gospel—the reason why he is not ashamed to preach it—is because the wrath of God is being revealed all around. "I am not ashamed to reveal the gospel, because the wrath of God is being revealed." Why is a person inspired to dedicate his life to find a cure for cancer? It is because he has seen people around him that he loves die from the disease. And, when my eyes were finally opened to see the wrath of God all around me and in the lives of people I loved, I wanted to dedicate my life to preaching the gospel; because I was convinced (and am still convinced today) that the gospel is the only cure to the problem. There needs to be a revelation of the gospel, because there is a revelation of wrath.

The more difficult answer to the question of how to bring people back deals with the whole art of witnessing. How do you bring a person to the point of wanting to receive the gospel? How do you find that particular truth that will still penetrate the thick layers of darkness that have built up for years? There is no easy answer to that question. It takes time and patience and wisdom.

And, most of the time the particular truth that will touch the heart of a certain person is not directly related to the obvious expression of wrath being revealed in that person's life. For instance, the best way to start the process of change in a person who practices gratifying his sexual desires with someone

of the same sex is probably not to confront him with that particular activity. Political attacks directed toward homosexuals will do little to turn the tide. Signing a petition will do little to change the minds of people who have their minds made up. It will only strengthen their resolve. We have so much to learn about sharing the gospel, don't we?

Tomorrow a group of pastors from Chinese churches will be meeting in New York City to decide how they should corporately respond to the present homosexual issues confronting the metropolitan area. I hope and I pray that the conclusion they come to is that there is only one solution to the problem, and it is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And, I hope and I pray they will take some time to think how Chinese churches in this metropolitan area can reach out to the homosexual community. It won't be easy, because each individual has his own baggage.

Is it possible that, within the context of a small group, a homosexual can feel welcomed and loved? Is it possible that he can be brought to understand that our basic problem is really not all that different from his? The wrath of God is revealed in all of us, because all of us are truth suppressors. Can we really say to anyone who comes to one of our small groups, "We love you, please join us in our struggle against sin?"

PRAYER. The new understanding I received about God's wrath in 1974 changed me forever. I now look at things from an entirely different perspective. And I find that, as long as I am aware of the wrath of God being revealed around me, my heart is able to burn with the passion of sharing the gospel. Only when I lose the vision of God's wrath does the passion fade. Our greatest problem is not a lack of training in evangelism. Our greatest problem is a lack of vision and understanding of the wrath of God being revealed all around us. May God give us the vision and understanding so we will experience the passion.