



Catalog No. 656

Romans 1:18-32

Third Message

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October 18, 1987

# THE ONGOING REVELATION OF GOD'S WRATH AMONG MEN

Of all the events in the news this past week, the rescue of Jessica McClure captured my heart. This 18-month-old child spent three days at the bottom of a 22-foot dry well while rescuers dug through solid rock to get to her. I was amazed by how quickly all of our hearts were gripped by her situation. The mundane distractions of life were put back into proper perspective. When I saw her bruised body brought up out of the well, I wept with joy for her salvation.

The principle is clear: When we see our need, we quickly change our priorities and devote our efforts to our own salvation. The Bible tells us that our spiritual need is greater than Jessica's physical need. Our pit is much deeper, and our souls are confined in a much more constricting environment. We will spend more than three days in that darkness without the Lord Jesus Christ if we are not rescued.

Yet it is difficult for man to recognize his need. First, because he does not understand the nature of the wrath of God, he does not see it being manifested in his life. Second, the human heart is such that it is able to build defensive walls for its own protection. These walls are enormously high due to our pride and massively thick due to our fear of being made vulnerable. Because of this, it is difficult to tear these walls down in order to have the human heart see itself in all its sin.

Yet this is the task the apostle Paul takes on in the first three chapters of the book of Romans. In fact, he pens 64 verses which he wants us to contemplate before he tells us about the good news of the gospel. We will never be able to understand the good news of the gospel until we understand the holiness and wrath of God.

Thus, Paul takes on the role of a probing prosecuting attorney. He is the Perry Mason of the New Testament, and he brings all of humanity before the righteous Judge in a courtroom drama involving three cases. The first case deals with the great mass of the pagan world. In the second case he prosecutes the moralists. In the third case, the religious man, as typified by the Jew, is brought before the Judge.

Let us look at our first case in which God reveals that man, as he stands before the righteous Judge, is guilty as charged. Because of this, the great mass of mankind is recipient of the wrath of God. In Romans 1:18-32, we will look at the nature of God's wrath, the cause, its manifestations, and its purpose.

## I. The Nature of God's Wrath (1:18)

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness... (Rom 1:18 NASB)**

People enjoy talking about the love and grace of God, but no one wants to talk about his wrath. Because God lives unseen in heaven, the pagan believes he is not concerned with things on earth. It is difficult for the pagan mind to see any evidence of the justice of God at work in history. Yet Paul writes to the contrary. From heaven, God's

throne, the wrath of God is being revealed. He wants us to know that the wrath of God is a reality, that there is nothing outside of his sovereign rule. God sees and is concerned about all, and he acts in response to what he sees.

What is interesting is that the wrath of God is not revealed in the gospel. Rather, it is revealed in human experience. As one commentator said, "The history of the world is the judgment of the world." The wrath of God is a reality.

Second, Paul tells us that the wrath of God is personal. Paul understood that the world was created by a personal, holy God and that this personal God upholds his moral order. Therefore, the wrath of God is not some impersonal principle under which man is placed. It is not some force, fate or bad luck. Rather, it comes from a holy Judge dealing out personal retribution. God is the subject of the verb "gave them over" three times in this text.

Finally, we are told that God's wrath is principled and controlled. One reason we misunderstand God's wrath is because we compare it to human anger which is often arbitrary and uninhibited. It has no controls and is filled with vindictiveness and personal animosity. Thus, to apply the word "anger" to God is difficult for us. But God's wrath is not an outburst of uncontrollable anger. In fact, the Greek word Paul uses to describe his wrath does not refer to an emotional outburst. Rather, it is a subtle, abiding condition of personal revulsion and vigorous opposition to evil. God's wrath is free of personal animosity and vindictiveness. Isaiah describes God's wrath in 28:21:

**For the Lord will rise up as at Mount Perazim,  
He will be stirred up as in the valley of Gibeon;  
To do His task, His unusual [strange] task,  
And to work His work, His extraordinary [alien] work.**

Isaiah tells us that the execution of wrath is a strange and alien deed to the Lord. He girds himself up slowly and reluctantly when he has to execute it.

In summary, the nature of God's wrath is that it is a reality. It is personal and it is principled.

What prompts God to get angry and to exert his wrath on mankind? Paul tells us in the opening paragraph, beginning again in verse 18.

## II. The Cause of God's Wrath (1:18-23)

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their**

**speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.**

The first thing Paul tells us is that the wrath of God is not prompted by ignorance. He does not say that the wrath of God is given to those who are ignorant of the truth. Rather, he says it is given to those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. What man suppresses is the truth that is plainly revealed in God's creation.

Notice the dignity God gives man. First, he made him in his own image. Then he gave him the creation to enjoy. And he treated man with maturity and expected him to see certain things in the creation. God wanted man to understand that the creation is a gateway to the heavenly realities that cannot be seen.

God demonstrated to man that creation was never meant to be an end in itself. Through it, man was to learn that God has eternal power and a divine nature. Whenever man gazes at the stars and galaxies, the sun and the moon, and the universe whirling about, he is to learn that there is a great power that has been around longer than man. It does not take a graduate degree to observe the activity of the weather and the physical creation and to realize that some eternal power has to be behind it all.

Man was to also learn that God is divine, that there is a Deity who exists outside of nature. Paul says there is no excuse for pantheism which holds that God is in nature. The tree is not a god; it is created by God. The sun and moon are not gods; they were created by God who exists outside of them. The apostle Paul says, "These things have been clearly perceived being understood." God expects mankind to see beyond nature to his deity and everlasting power.

This is how I came to Christ. I grew up in an agnostic home with no religious instruction and attended a school dominated by evolutionary thought. But as I looked at creation and my own life, I knew there was a Creator. That was all I knew, but I gave him honor.

Paul says mankind has no excuse for suppressing the truth. Therefore, God's wrath is not arbitrary. Rather than giving thanks to God and honoring him with the social status he deserves, man suppresses the truth in two ways: in ungodliness and in unrighteous behavior—an attitude and an action.

The ungodly attitude is arrogance. The wrath of God comes because of arrogance not ignorance. Rather than thanking God and honoring him, man chooses to be wise in his own eyes. This is an arrogant heart and an ungrateful spirit. There is really only one sin mentioned in this text: the pride of the heart.

This arrogant attitude gives way to unrighteous behavior which is idolatry. This provokes the wrath of God. Paul describes idolatry with the verb "exchange" which is used three times in the text. Idolatry can be thought of as the Great Exchange!

During his travels, a friend of mine came across a beautiful gold nugget which he took home as a gift for his wife. That nugget became symbolic of his love for her. At one time, this couple took in a young man in order to help him grow spiritually. In response to their Christian hospitality, he stole the nugget and exchanged it at a pawn shop for what he thought it was worth. The police arrived at the shop fifteen minutes later and asked the owner, "Did you get the nugget?" The broker said he had exchanged it for \$100. This young man had sold the priceless nugget for a few dollars to feed himself. By the time the police arrived, the owner had already melted it

down, and it had lost its value. The youth had exchanged something priceless for something of little value.

My friends, that is idolatry—when the glory of the majestic Creator, who is infinite, transcendent and incorruptible, is exchanged for something of no value. It is one thing for pagans to do this, it is quite another for God's people to do it! This is the charge Jeremiah leveled at Israel in 2:11, 13:

**Has a nation changed gods;  
When they were not gods?  
But My people have changed their glory  
For that which does not profit...  
For My people have committed two evils:  
They have forsaken Me,  
The fountain of living waters,  
To hew for themselves cisterns,  
Broken cisterns,  
That can hold no water.**

This is idolatry—when man forsakes the fountain of life that fills his soul with living water and makes a cistern for himself. He is really trying to make his own god, a god who cannot even hold life because it is broken. He keeps pouring life into his god, and it keeps draining out.

By using this verb "exchange" three times, Paul also reveals the three phases of idolatrous worship. Verse 23 says, "They exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man." Idolatry begins with the eye beholding something and glorying in it. Through the eyes, the idol enters the heart and gains access to the soul. Jesus was referring to idolatry when he said, "If the eye is clear the whole body will be filled with light, but if the eye is evil what a great darkness."

The second level is seen in verse 25: "They exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever." Once the idol enters the eye gate, it is then taken into the heart. Once it has your heart, it claims your affections. You bow down to it and serve it. You give this idol all your resources, energy and thoughts. As you feed it, your appetite increases, and you find yourself serving it more and more.

The third stage involves the body. Idolatry begins with vision, moves into the heart and then manifests itself in the body. Verse 26 says, "Their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function." Paul is specifically talking about homosexuality, but whatever idol you take into your heart will make a manifestation in your body. This is the stage in which you worship this perverted idol, and its perversions will be seen in the body, whether in homosexuality, adultery or some other act. This is what provokes the wrath of God.

The nature of God's wrath is that it is a reality. It is personal and principled. Its cause is not ignorance but the willful suppression of the truth expressed in high-handed idolatry. The next question is, How does God manifest his wrath?

When I told my oldest daughter Becky I was going to be preaching on the wrath of God, I asked her if she knew what that meant. She said, "You bet I do, Dad. It is a lightning bolt or thunder!" She obviously thinks it is similar to Dad getting cross. But that is not the wrath of God. The phrase that defines the wrath of God is repeated three times in this text and is used in conjunction with the verb "exchanged."

### III. The Manifestations of God's Wrath (1:24-32)

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire towards one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, malice; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Three times Paul says, "He gave them over." God's wrath is not manifested in thunder and lightning but in the quiet act of giving us over to the perverted gods of our own making. God's wrath is silent and invisible. Because of this, I think it is all the more terrifying. God just quietly gives us what we want.

God gives us more dignity as human beings than we want to claim for ourselves or for our children. God says, "You have freedom of choice. You do not have power to act, but you have power to choose whom you will serve. If you want to serve Baal, Baal you will serve. If you want to serve me, you will serve me." Thus, God says, "If you want to commit adultery, I will get out of your way. If you want to cheat on your income tax or be a workaholic, I will get out of your way. If you want to make ministry your God to the point of destroying your family, I will step aside."

Whatever god we want, he will give us. And he gives us the full responsibility of our choices. Our criminal system does not even do that. We hardly allow our children that freedom, for we are always bailing them out. He gives us dignity. His love for us is so great he will never force it upon us. If we do not want his love, we do not have to have it. Love must be free to be love. It can never be coerced.

The second thing we learn about the manifestation of God's wrath is that it is progressive. Paul lists the areas of our lives that are affected by the wrath of God. The three stages correspond to the phases of the exchange of idolatry.

Idolatry begins with the eyes and mind. When you put an idol in your mind, you are given over to vain reasonings and futile speculations. Consider how much of our lives are spent thinking about idols, useless things. We get so preoccupied. This is the first stage of God's wrath.

During the second stage, this idolatry begins to affect your affections. Paul says, "God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity." Two terrifying things happen in this stage. Though you cannot see or hear the wrath of God, you can feel it. You experience an actual perversion of your desires. God's created desires which were

intended for good become twisted. Not only are they perverted, but you become enslaved to them. This is how the heart is affected.

The problem is that a person takes on the character of the god he serves. These false gods always destroy their worshipers. Think about how abnormal our sins are. Adultery is not normal. Putting a white powder up one's nose is not normal. Smoking is not normal. These are all perversions of correct desires. This is what idolatry does to us.

Once the heart is perverted and enslaved, the body then becomes the stage for the worship of the idol. Paul says, "In the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire towards one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error." Paul lists homosexuality as a manifestation of God's wrath because it was prevalent among the Romans. Many of the Caesars were gay and died from sexual diseases. Paul points this out as the active stage of idolatry, but he could have listed other sins for our culture. The point is that no matter what idol you have placed in your heart, your body will eventually be affected.

This is what Jesus meant when he said, "What you do in secret will one day be shouted on the rooftops." I do not think he meant that an investigative reporter will catch you in your closet worshipping your idol, as happened with ex-Presidential candidate Gary Hart. That is possible, but usually the wrath of God works in such a way that your own body reveals what god you have been worshipping. Have you ever watched a workaholic? He cannot rest. He can never meditate on Scripture or stop to talk with his children because the god of work is demanding his thoughts and energy. Have you ever known any alcoholics? Their bodies reveal their enslavement. Adultery is also worn on the face. Your body shouts which god you have been worshipping in the closet.

This realization first struck me in my freshman psychology course in college. The great debate among psychologists is man's relationship to his mind and will. One school says he has free choice. The other school observes man in his deviant social behavior, sees that the behavior is enslaving, and concludes that man does not have a free will. They see him as a product of his environment and genes. I remember reading this Romans passage for the first time and saying, "The answer is here! Why doesn't the professor read Romans?" Man is free. He does make a free choice of whom he serves. But then that god captures his heart and mind. In experience, it does appear that he is a slave. But at one point he had the dignity of free will.

Paul takes the cycle even further. He started with the mind, and he returns to the mind. Look at verse 28: "They did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer. Therefore, God gave them over to a depraved mind." There is a wordplay involved here. Paul says, "They tested or proved God and found him wanting. When he was removed from their thinking, they were left with untesting, unapproving minds." As a result of their idolatry, their minds could no longer test reality. When the mind cannot test reality and make ethical choices, it becomes susceptible to all kinds of evil. Thus, Paul says they are filled with all forms of unrighteousness because they cannot test life.

The medical world is advancing in the areas of conception and gene-splicing and is forcing us to make ethical decisions we can no longer make because man does not want God in his thinking. Last week I was listening to the surrogate mothers testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee on the legality of surrogate parenting.

They said they went into it thinking it was good to rent their womb to cultivate an egg for someone else. But as the babies grew in their wombs, bonding took place. When their babies were taken away, these women experienced something similar to their infant dying. How depraved we are! We cannot make any ethical decisions until we have had the painful experience of death in our midst.

The apostle Paul begins where he ends, with the mind, to show that the cycle of God's wrath is progressive. As the mind makes new choices, the passions are further enslaved and wrongly perverted. And the body shouts more loudly. The point is that we cannot control our idolatry.

I remember a man who had been disciplined in our midst for adultery. He said to me, "I always had a bottom line. I would do this, but I would not do that." In only one year, all of his bottom lines dropped out. He thought he could control them, but the wrath of God gave him over to his desires and the cycle became worse. When you become filled to all unrighteousness, you will do things you never thought you would. There is no bottom line to idolatry. You cannot indulge just a little.

At the end, Paul gives us a list of terms like insolent, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful. These are social terms. When society becomes like this, its social fabric begins to pull apart. "Insolent" refers to someone who considers himself above the gods. He is above rebuke and above the standards. He acts with increasing arrogance toward those who are not powerful enough to retaliate. The term "unloving" does not speak of spiritual love. It is the natural love that bonds a mother and child together. Paul also calls these people "unfaithful." Even the strongest of commitments are thrown aside.

I was ten years old when my first sister married. After a 16-day honeymoon, her husband went home to his mother and never saw her again. As a result, my sister had a nervous breakdown. My other sister was married a few years ago. She did not know that she had married an alcoholic. He had been dry for five years and had not told her his history. On the honeymoon, he "fell off the wagon." He felt so guilty in deceiving her he could not accept her forgiveness. To punish himself, he committed adultery with her best friend. That marriage lasted only 24 days. The most basic commitments cannot stand when idolatry is pursued.

Paul also describes the final end of the wrath of God. He says, "Although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them." Not only are they corrupt, but they also seek proselytes. Evil loves company. In Proverbs 1, the father first teaches his juvenile son how the criminal mind works. He says, "Son, they are aggressive. Just as you are seeking to convert them to Christ, they are seeking to convert you to their point of view. If you are passive, you will die." This is true! In our day, the evil viewpoint is even propagated in the media.

If ever there was testimony to the wrath of God being manifest among men, the breakdown of our society supports it. Adultery, rape, and pornography are rampant. James Dobson says there are only two things that we have not done with pornography in our nation—sex with the dead and drinking the blood of human sacrifice. We are a perverted people among whom the wrath of God is clearly manifest.

The nature of God's wrath is that it is a reality. It is personal and principled. Its cause is high-handed idolatry. Its manifestation is seen in God giving us over to the idols we choose to serve.

#### IV. The Purpose of God's Wrath

How should we respond to this? What is the purpose of the wrath of God? Paul did not write this passage to Christians in order to perpetuate self-righteousness. It is easy for us to condemn today's pagan world, saying that they are getting what they deserve because they abandoned the Judeo-Christian ethic. When we encounter AIDS, we can become self-righteous.

But I think we have to admit that we too have stood under God's wrath. This text was written to make us humble, not self-righteous. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit we are also prone to idolatry. We can all sing with the hymn writer: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the one I love. Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above." God upholds his moral order, and we ought to have humility as we face him.

Second, Paul did not write this to cause us to despair about society. It is easy to look at our society and retreat behind monastery walls. Our attitude is to let the pagan world go to hell in the handcart of their own making. But that is not why this was written. Paul did not look at the Roman world this way.

He wants us, as messengers of the gospel, to have hope. Like paramedics, we are to rescue the Jessicas from the tombs of their hell. We are to seek those who are crying out for help and admitting their need. We have good news for them! The wrath of God is not revealed in the gospel. It is revealed in human experience. Therefore, we are not messengers of his wrath but of the gospel which is not revealed in human experience. We need to look at society and say, "What a great time to live! Everyone is crying out in need." What a thrill to be a spiritual paramedic today!

I have a friend named Arthur who is a doctor. He has been married twice, and both marriages ended in failure. When the AIDS epidemic hit, Arthur volunteered at a San Francisco clinic where he met a man he came to know well. He asked the man, "Tell me about yourself. What were you doing?" The man admitted that he had given himself to several hundred sexual relationships because he wanted someone to love him. He died in that despair. This so gripped Arthur's heart in the midst of his own spiritual condition that he looked up out of his well and met a woman who led him to Jesus Christ. Now Arthur shares this good news wherever he goes because he knows the condition of mankind and he has hope.

Clearly the wrath of God is revealed among men. Will you reveal the gospel to the extent that God has already revealed his wrath?

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