

All Roads Lead Here: What's The Problem?

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Proverbs 5:21-23; John 3:19-21; Romans 1:18-25

Our final reading today comes from Romans 1:18-25. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word. "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. 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 men are without excuse. 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. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator -- who is forever praised. Amen."

All of us love good news. We want to celebrate when something great happens. Your kids get all A's, you get a new car, your student loans are paid off, we want to sing about those. We all kinda wish that life was good news upon good news, that it would never end. We're even really jealous of someone whose life always seems to go right.

Why do we do that? It's because we understand bad news. We have experienced enough true hardships in our lives that we appreciate good news for what it is. When the bad news is serious, the good news is even better. When you've spent a few grand on car repairs before, you know what good news it is to find out the problem was just a five dollar gasket your friend can fix for free. When you know what cancer can do, it's incredibly good news to hear that everything is benign. In a sense, we can't appreciate good news if we've never known bad news.

The word "gospel" means good news. The good news is that Jesus Christ saves. But if you don't know the bad news, the gospel doesn't make any sense. But I've been asked by unbelievers and church members alike, "Jesus saves us from what?" When someone says "Saved from what?", it implies they don't need any sort of rescuing or salvation. It proves they don't know or fully understand the bad news.

We're going to travel with Paul through the bad news the next few weeks. We don't like the bad news. But we must understand it if we are to reject our own sin and encourage others to do the same. John Wesley said, "Before I can preach love, mercy and grace, I must preach sin, Law and judgment." Martin Luther wrote, "The first duty of the gospel preacher is to declare God's moral law and to show the nature of sin." In our own day, preacher John MacArthur put it plainly. "Grace means nothing to a person who does not know he is sinful and that such sinfulness means he is separated from God and damned. It is therefore pointless to preach grace until the impossible demands of the Law and the reality of guilt before God are preached."

So here's the start of the bad news. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." So we have to immediately stop to figure out what the wrath of God is, because ultimately, that's what we're saved from – God's wrath. We so seldom hear about God's wrath that we might jump to wrong conclusions. By definition, wrath is extreme anger resulting in punishment or vengeance. And we have hardly any good examples of human wrath because we don't do extreme anger well. We want to get even. We want payback.

Have any of you seen **The Untouchables** with Kevin Costner and Sean Connery? There's a scene where Connery's Irish cop Malone tells the straight-laced Elliot Ness how to finally bring justice to Al Capone. Malone says, "You wanna know how to get Capone? They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. *That's* the *Chicago* way!" That's human wrath. It always leads to destruction, people are hurt, and it doesn't reflect godliness.

But God's wrath is not human wrath. It is perfect. It is anger. But unlike human wrath, it is completely justified because He knows every detail. He doesn't punish based on innuendo or false witnesses. He sees perfectly; He judges perfectly; He carries out punishment perfectly. No one with a full understanding of God's perfection will ever think His wrath is anything but completely justified. If we have a true view of our own sinfulness, we will know that God's wrath on us is good and right, and we need to be saved from it.

Moreover, we want God to have wrath. We need Him to have wrath. When we think of every terrible thing that's gone down over the millennia, we need God to be angry about it. I don't want God to look at Nazi Germany or North Korea or the communist purges of Russia and China or the hideous wars of Syria and Mozambique and to be OK with it. If I'm angry about those things, how much more should God be upset at the destruction of the people He created? How much more should God be upset at murder, rape, torture? Because He knows every last detail of what goes on. My mind can't fathom it. We cry out to God for justice. We want God to have wrath on the evil in this world. The only problem, as we'll see, is that we're evil too.

Now what is God first and foremost angry about? Believe it or not, it's not those things I just mentioned. Those are symptoms of the disease, but they aren't its root. The root is godlessness and wickedness from those who suppress the truth. God is truth. And every last one of us suppresses the truth of God. We do not acknowledge Him as our Creator, our Lord, and our Ruler. We don't thank Him for all that He has done for us. Now that isn't to say that some of us weren't raised in the church and knew of God from a young age. It's that we all suppress the truth of God's existence, power, might, and right over us.

Everyone knows that God exists. You can deny God exists; you can say, "I don't believe in God." You can think it in your mind and reason your way to that conclusion. You can work out proofs and paradigms that support your arguments. But to do so is to lie to yourself first and then to others. God's stamp on us and this planet and this universe is indelible. As Paul goes on to say, "what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them." God didn't have to make it so obvious to us, but He did. Everything on this earth points to a Creator. We can't know everything about Him, but we know enough.

Nobody goes to the Gratiot Cruise and says, “Look at all of those beautiful cars that put themselves together!” A few of us know how many people it takes to put together a car. Designers, artists, engineers, financiers, tradesmen, line workers – it takes many of them to make a car. We see how all the parts work together and we say, “Somebody must have put that car together.” Engines and pistons and rotors and gears don’t just magically come together into a car. Each individual piece requires someone creating and assembling it.

And when we say we “create,” it’s not wholly true. We give ourselves credit for rearranging matter into some other form – taking paint from dyes from plants and organizing it a certain way, taking bits of sand and forging them into microprocessors. We “create.” And yet our creations just rearrange what’s already here. To say that there is no creator is to say that every atom in the universe randomly came to be out of nothing and we just happened to luck out and wind up evolving on the infinitesimally unlikely planet that could support life. It’s absurd!

As Paul goes on to say, “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 men are without excuse.” God doesn’t judge anyone on what they can’t know. God doesn’t judge the person in the far reaches or in a harsh regime who has never heard of Jesus for not knowing Jesus. He will judge that person on what they know from creation.

We are without excuse when we do not worship God based on two things – God’s eternal power and divine nature. Creation screams to us that there is a divine being, one who is completely different from us, one who has authority over us, who made this world and everything in it. It also cries out that God is powerful and eternal. The molecules and planets that reveal His great design that we sung about earlier show that God’s power is immense and that He is everlasting. There’s never been a moment where things fell apart because God was asleep at the wheel. The person who has never heard the name YHWH or Jesus will be judged not on that, but on their suppressing the truth of God’s handwriting all across creation itself.

This doesn’t mean that God or the church is somehow against science, because when we say God created the world, we often get the question, “What about science?” Some people think science works against the Bible. But the word science simply means “knowledge.” All truth is God’s truth. True science is true knowledge of God’s truth. But human science, human knowledge of God’s truth, is often dead wrong. Human science is all about observation and how our observations hold up to testing. But our observations are limited by what we can see.

Newton was a genius, but he was also wrong about several scientific facts. Why was he wrong? He didn’t have the framework to know everything we now know. He was right as far as he could observe. He thought time was a constant, which isn’t true as things approach the speed of light. Einstein got that right with his theory of general relativity. But Einstein thought the universe was static and unchanging, which he got wrong. Or so we think from our observations.

Who knows what other observations are wrong? We know that microevolution is true; biologically, things do adapt to their conditions. But macroevolution, the evolution from one species into another, has never been observed. We've never found the missing links. So why do many think that evolution is right and Genesis must be wrong in describing human origins? It's because we want the truth to be something else than what it is. We can convince ourselves of an awful lot when we don't like the truth.

Science told us that smoking was good for your health – doctors said so in the television ads for cigarettes. (The American Medical Association journal took ads for cigarettes until the 1950s!) We couldn't prove there was a planet outside of our own solar system until 1992! Science told us ulcers were caused by stress. (They're caused by bacteria.) Need I go on?

We trust human science in as much as we can observe and report truth accurately. But we aren't very accurate, and we aren't very truthful. We would prefer to rule ourselves, to be our own gods, and we'll fudge the science if we have to. Why? That's what Paul talks about next. We are without excuse “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.”

Everyone, in great and small ways, has not glorified God properly and given Him the thanks He deserves. We don't acknowledge God because it means we would owe Him allegiance; we would be obligated to Him. We would much rather do our own thing than follow what God has created us to do. And God lets that happen.

The result of ignoring God is futility. We stop moving forward. Our thoughts are darkened – we no longer have concern for what is true and good and noble. You can't make sense of life, you can't make sense of our world, if God isn't front and center. So we come up with philosophies, ideas, and concepts to try and explain everything. But it's futile. It's like looking in a tree for a penguin or expecting to see a train on the interstate. It's just not going to happen. But if you don't want to see God, you will find a way to become blind to Him.

That's where Paul goes next – the first way we become blind to God. “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” Idolatry is the chief way that we become fools. In ancient Judaism, to be a fool wasn't just to be dumb – because for us, being a fool is a pretty mild insult. To be a fool was to be spiritually ignorant and headed for eternal destruction. The word in Latin for an atheist or agnostic is “ignoramus.”

John Calvin said that the human heart was an idol factory – we manufacture them over and over again. To us, worshipping a physical idol seems strange, a remnant of an ancient time. Yet people all over the world still bow before statues of gods and goddesses and buddhas, offering their worship at ancestral temples and gravesites. God made our hearts to worship Him, and the desire and need to worship didn't go away when our ancestors sinned. The worship became aimed at things we could see and control, things that ultimately made us gods. The Hindus say that all their thousands of gods and goddesses are just representations of parts of the one god we cannot know. But we *can* know Him. We *choose not* to know Him.

And just in case we think we are safe, we have idols too. An idol is anything that takes the place of God and godliness and godly virtues in your praise. We don't bow before a statue, but if you choose sports over worship, you have an idol. If you prioritize your TV shows over spending time with God, you have an idol. Do you skip church because "family comes first?" You have an idol. Does your hobby matter more than your service to God? You have an idol. If you covet a new car or new home or new TV set, you have an idol. At least the ancient pagans knew they were worshipping *something*; we do it and we don't even realize what we're doing. They sacrificed bulls and cows; we sacrifice cash and time.

What's even worse is that we set our idols up as an excuse to do sinful things. It is no accident that many ancient temples employed ritual prostitutes; it became a part of their worship. The Kama Sutra of India came out of those practices. Instead of worship that delights God, we choose things to worship that delight our own senses. Look around our culture, our hobbies, sports, and interests, and see how accepting they are of everything but biblical morality and we know we are no different. That's why Paul says, "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another."

We'll talk about the spiral downward into sin next week, but the chief thing I want to point out is this: "God *gave them over* to impurity." Some translations say, "God gave them up" to it. God doesn't command us to sin because God never authors sin. But the scariest thing in the world is when God finally says, "Let them have their own way." The scariest thing is when God says, "You think you want this thing so badly? In spite of all the harm it will do to you? After all the ways I've held you back from the full measure of the consequences? OK, then, not my will but thy will be done." That's when we're really in trouble. That's when we fall headlong into sin.

Paul sums up this whole section with this statement: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator -- who is forever praised. Amen." It's going to get worse before it gets better, and it all starts here: with believing the lies of Satan, of believing that we can be like God, that we can take the place of God, that we can do what we want without consequences, that God doesn't exist – or perhaps even worse, that He doesn't matter. Do we take this seriously? Because our eternal destiny depends on really understanding the problem and why it is so desperately important for us to be saved from the wrath of God. The only way to take God seriously is to realize the seriousness of your sin against Him and to know that, unless you are saved from God's wrath, you will experience it.

As this section closes, Paul still writes from the other side of the cross. Even as he describes our horrific problem, he says "the Creator is (and should be) forever praised." Paul knows the solution. We are not forever bound to suppress the truth about God and replace it with a lie. Christ has come to set us free. Any of us who have turned away from sin and turned to Christ are forgiven. We can say with Paul, we will forever praise our Lord and God, our Creator. If this is where you are, rejoice that you have been saved from the grave situation of sin. And if not, think carefully about your position before God. Are you willing to risk your soul for your pleasures? Because, as we'll learn next week, this is only the start of the downward spiral of sin in both our personal lives and our communities. Do not miss the opportunity to believe in Christ and to find yourself not in the way of God's wrath but embraced by His grace.