

Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God (Romans 1:18a)

Introduction: Please open your Bible to Romans 1:18.

In the 1960s R.C. Sproul was a professor of theology at the Conwell School of Theology on the campus of Temple University in Philadelphia. And on one particular day in 1969, after enjoying a quiet lunch, Sproul was walking across campus back to his classroom. He was minding his own business when a man suddenly appeared out of nowhere, stood in front of him stopping his progress, and asked him very directly, “Are you saved?”

Startled by the question, Sproul wasn't quite sure how to respond. But the first words out of his mouth were: “Saved from what?” The man appeared to be as surprised by the question as Sproul was surprised by his question.

When it comes to the gospel and to salvation, what exactly are we saved from? Tragically there is much confusion in the church today on how to answer that question. There are many who think of salvation in purely **man-centered terms**. They think Jesus came to fix their marriage, to make them successful, to rescue them from poor self-esteem, or to deliver them from an unfulfilled life.

There are others who would give a biblical answer and say that Jesus came to save us from the devil and from sin. And they would be right. But that is not enough. There is something else we need to be saved from that people rarely talk about today and that is this: We need to be saved from God. Jesus came into the world to save us from God.

The word “salvation” means **deliverance**. It implies that we are in **grave danger**. As sinners we are in **serious peril**. And the greatest danger we face, by far, is God, the wrath of God.

On July 8, 1741, **Jonathan Edwards** preached a sermon called, *Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God*. Some historians say this was the most famous sermon ever preached on American soil. But I am afraid that its message has largely been lost on our generation. This is certainly not what is taught in our culture or in our public education system. It is not even what is taught in the vast majority of our churches many of which would never even mention the wrath of God.

But unless and until you understand the solemn truth of the wrath of God, you will not understand or appreciate the gospel. If you are to understand the gospel as the Bible presents it you must know that your greatest need in life is not **good health**. It is not **earthly prosperity**. It is not **financial security**. It is not even **food and water**. Your greatest need in life, by far, is to be saved from God, from the wrath of Almighty God. And the only one who can save you from God is God. Salvation, as taught in the Bible, is defined in this way: We are saved *by* God, *from* God, *for* God. To fill that out more fully: We are saved *by* the grace of God, *from* the wrath of God, *for* the glory of God. Dear people that brings us to **Romans 1**.

This morning it is our privilege to **begin the body** of the greatest letter ever written, Paul's letter to the church in Rome. So far in our series on **Romans**, we have given twelve messages on the **introduction** of this letter in the opening seventeen verses. But now, as we come to **v. 18**, we are

turning a corner as we begin the body of the letter.

As we have said many times, the book of **Romans** is preeminently about the gospel of Jesus Christ from beginning to end and everywhere in between. This letter is like a **theological treatise** on the gospel. It is the fullest, most comprehensive treatment in the Bible on the gospel in the Bible.

In terms of our outline, so far we have seen...

I. The Gospel Introduced (1:1-17).

And now we come to the next section...

II. The Gospel Explained (1:18-4:25).

The way Paul begins to explain the gospel is by explaining **our need for the gospel**. If we are to understand and appreciate the enormous value of the gospel, we must first understand and appreciate **why we need the gospel**. And that is what Paul does in **1:18-3:20**. In this lengthy section of **Romans**, Paul is like a **prosecuting attorney** who **gives logical arguments** and who **makes an airtight case** that all people are sinners in the hands of an angry God. If I had to summarize this entire section with one word, it would be the word "condemnation." As sinners we are in great danger.

So please, don't let Paul's pattern be lost on you. In **3:21-4:25** Paul will explain **the remedy for sin**. But before Paul explains the remedy for sin, he first establishes **our need for the remedy**. Like a physician, before giving the cure he first diagnoses our disease. And until you realize how devastating your spiritual diagnosis is, that you are terminally sick with sin, you will not really understand why the gospel is such good news. We need immediate medical attention for our souls because we are sick with sin and are under the condemnation of God.

Jonathan Edwards, "Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they won't bear their weight and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday; the sharpest sight can't discern them. God has so many different, unsearchable ways of taking wicked men out of the world and sending them to hell."

Sinners are one heartbeat away from hell.

And so to underscore the good news of the gospel, Paul first gives us the bad news of sin and condemnation before God.

If you don't follow this pattern in your own thinking, you will at best have a superficial understanding of the gospel and salvation. One of the deep burdens I have as a Christian and as a Pastor is to promote a high view of God. I detest with all my being when God and the things of God are trivialized. There is nothing trivial about God or the things of God. There is nothing light about God or the things of God. These are the weightiest things there are in the universe, and the church today desperately needs to be reoriented around the profound weightiness of the gospel and salvation.

There is nothing superficial or light about the gospel or about our need for salvation from the

wrath of God. And so again, before Paul explains the cure, he expounds upon the disease. To be sure this is not a pleasant section of **Romans**. Indeed, it is a very hard section. But it is absolutely essential if you are to understand who you are as a sinner and what you need to be saved from.

One of the many benefits of verse by verse preaching through books of the Bible is that it forces you to deal with passages like this one that are uncomfortable but necessary.

In terms of our outline, I am calling this section...

A. The Need For Righteousness (1:18-3:20).

And the way Paul establishes our need for righteousness is by proving three things:

- 1. The condemnation of Gentiles (1:18-32).**
- 2. The condemnation of Jews (2:1-3:8).**
- 3. The condemnation of all (3:9-20).**

3:9 (the condemnation of all).

3:10-12 (the condemnation of all).

3:19 (the condemnation of all).

2:17, 25, 28; 3:1 (the condemnation of Jews).

Now, there are some who question whether or not Paul is specifically referring to Gentiles in **1:18-32**. To be fair, in **2:1-3:8** Paul uses the word "Jew/Jews" a number of times to identify who he is talking about. But in **1:18-32** Paul does not use the word "Gentile." But even though he doesn't use the word "Gentile" it seems clear that he is speaking specifically about Gentiles for three reasons:

1. When it comes to establishing the problem of sin, Paul **appeals to creation** rather than the Law (vv. 19-23).
2. The **kinds of sins** that Paul addresses in this section such as homosexuality were **virtually non-existent among the Jews**, but were **routine among the Gentiles**.
3. The statement in v. **32** does not seem to fit for most Jews. The Jews **prided themselves on their morality**, not their immorality.

For these reasons, I interpret **1:18-32** as the condemnation of Gentiles, not Jews and Gentiles, but Gentiles specifically.

Now we are going to look at this section under three headings:

a. The reality of God's wrath (v. 18a).

b. The reasons for God's wrath (vv. 18b-23).

c. The revelation of God's wrath (vv. 24-32).

This is a very heavy section. And frankly, I cannot think of a passage that is more relevant to our times in 21st century America than this one.

With the time that we have left this morning, we will only be able to see...

a. The reality of God's wrath (v. 18a).

In v. 16 Paul speaks about "the power of God." In v. 17 he speaks about "the righteousness of God." And now in v. 18 he speaks about "the wrath of God"... "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven"

The first thing I want you to see in v. 18 is that it is **grammatically connected** to the previous verses. We see this in Paul's use of the word "for." It's very unfortunate that the **NIV omits** this word "for" at the beginning of v. 18 and at the beginning of v. 17. That **obscures** Paul's logical argumentation. Paul uses the word "for" 4x in vv. 16-18. As we said last time, this is **a word of explanation.**

Going back to v. 15 Paul says he was eager to preach the gospel in Rome. But why was Paul eager to preach the gospel in Rome? He tells us in v. 16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel."

But why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel? He tells us in the next phrase: "For it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

But how does the gospel rescue sinners? Paul tells us in...

v. 17 "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed."

That leads to another critical question: Why is the righteousness of God necessary? Why do we need the righteousness of God? Paul tells us in...

v. 18 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..."

We need the righteousness of God because the wrath of God is against unrighteous people.

As we think about the reality of God's wrath, we will consider **six truths** about it beginning with...

1) The fact of God's wrath.

Many people ask: Is God really a God of wrath? What does v. 18 say? Yes. It says, "the wrath of God." This is not the wrath of the **devil** nor the wrath of **man**. It is "the wrath of God." The subject of the wrath of God is not some **isolated** teaching in the Bible found in just a few obscure verses. There are scores and scores of verses, in both the OT and the NT, about the wrath of God.

A.W. Pink, "A study of the concordance will show that there are *more* references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness."

Let me give you just a few examples (**Romans 2:5b; 3:5b; 12:19; Psalm 7:11**).

There are many people who do not like the idea that God is a God of wrath. There are many who are **embarrassed** by it, who try to **deny** it or **explain it away**, or **ignore** it altogether

A.W. Pink, "It is sad indeed to find so many professing Christians who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or who at least wish there were no such thing."

Several years ago, **the mainline Presbyterian Church (PCUSA)** put together a **new hymnal**. They wanted to include the hymn by the Gettys, *In Christ Alone*. But they wanted to change some of the words before including it in their hymnal. They didn't like the lyric, "Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied." They wanted to replace that with, "Till on that cross as Jesus died, the love of God was magnified." When the Gettys refused to grant permission to change the lyrics, the hymn committee voted to not include *In Christ Alone* in their new hymnal. Why? Because they don't like the wrath of God.

A.W. Pink, "God has made no attempt to conceal the facts concerning His wrath. He is not ashamed to make it known that vengeance and fury belong unto Him."

One of the ways we can be **ashamed of the gospel** is by being ashamed of the wrath of God. People may be ashamed of the wrath of God, but God isn't and neither is the Bible. It is fact beyond dispute that God is a God of wrath.

2) The meaning of God's wrath.

What is God's wrath?

Wayne Grudem, "God's wrath means that he intensely hates all sin."

Leon Morris, "[God's wrath is] the settled and active opposition of God's holy nature to everything that is evil."

God has a settled, holy hatred for everything that is sinful and evil.

3) The goodness of God's wrath.

There are many who claim that the wrath of God is **morally objectionable**. They say things like, "The wrath of God is not compatible with the love of God." Some even say that the wrath of God makes Him a moral monster. When people say things like that they are claiming that the wrath of God is somehow **not good**.

But the opposite is true. Because God is good, God is a God of wrath. If God were not a God of wrath He would be **morally evil**. Listen, God is not **morally indifferent** when it comes to sin, evil, and injustice. God is aroused to anger by sin, evil, and injustice. And that is a good thing.

Divine anger and retribution against sin, evil, and unrighteousness is good and just. It is a dreadful thing to imagine if God were not a God of wrath.

Wayne Grudem, "It may surprise us to find how frequently the Bible talks about the wrath of God. Yet if God loves all that is right and good, and all that conforms to his moral character, then it should not be surprising that he would hate everything that is opposed to his moral character."

Where some people get hung up is when they **think of God's wrath in human terms**. Do you like yourself when you get angry? Most of us are **ashamed** of ourselves when we get angry because when we get angry we are not at our best. We can behave in some really ugly ways when we get angry. In our anger, we can explode in uncontrolled rage. We easily lose our temper

and say and do destructive, regrettable things. Because of anger, marriages have ended and families have been destroyed. People even kill each other because of anger.

But God's anger is not like human anger. God is never angry because He is in a bad mood. God never loses His temper or flies into a rage. God's anger is settled, controlled, and always exercised with good reason. God's anger is never unjust or undeserved. It is always righteous and good. God's wrath is perfect. It is pure. It is holy.

4) The timing of God's wrath.

"the wrath of God is revealed"

In v. 17 "the righteousness of God is revealed" in the gospel. Now in v. 18 Paul speaks of **another revelation** from God, "the wrath of God is revealed." There is certainly a **future aspect** to the wrath of God. There is coming the day of wrath (2:5). But here Paul speaks about **present wrath**. The verb "revealed" is **present tense**. This is a wrath that is being revealed by God right now. We will have more to say about this when we get to v. 24. But for now, please know that Paul is speaking about the wrath of God that is presently being revealed on the earth. Why is our culture so evil and so insane? Because the wrath of God is being revealed.

5) The source of God's wrath.

"the wrath of God is revealed from heaven"

The book of **Revelation** speaks of the bowls of God's wrath which picture the wrath of God being poured out from heaven upon the earth. That is the picture here. God is pouring out His wrath upon the world from heaven. It's like a river of wrath flowing from heaven to earth.

Now, this is also a reminder that **heaven rules**. God is in heaven. God's throne is in heaven. And it is from God's throne in heaven that He rules and reigns over all of His vast creation. The **devil** does not rule the universe. **Man** does not rule the universe. **Chance or fate** do not rule the universe. **God**, and God alone, rules the universe, from heaven

As the hymnwriter says...

"This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget.

That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

We live in a **moral world** because that is how God made it. God is a moral God and He is the Judge of all the earth. And when God's moral law is broken, it provokes His anger. And He pours forth His wrath from heaven.

6) The target of God's wrath.

"the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men"

The target of God's wrath is **men, people**. But God does not target people with His wrath **simply because they are human**. There is nothing inherently wrath-worthy about being human. God aims His wrath at people **because they are ungodly and unrighteous**. Man is bad, God is mad.

Paul says in **Eph. 2:3** that we "were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."

John 3:36, “...the wrath of God abides on him.”

Now, there is a **very popular saying** that goes like this: “God hates the sin but He loves the sinner.” Is that a true statement? It’s only partially true. Yes, God hates sin. And yes, God loves sinners. But the Bible also teaches that God hates sinners.

What does God send to hell? God doesn’t send sin to hell. He sends people to hell (Matt. 10:28).

Psalms 5:4-6; 11:4-6

As a sinner you need to be saved from God, from the wrath of God. You need to flee from the wrath of God.

Conclusion: This past week we have all watched tragic events unfold in Kabul, Afghanistan. The **Taliban** have taken over the country and have set up a perimeter around the American controlled airport. The reports of violence and bloodshed by the hands of the Taliban abound.

I have thought many times what it would be like to be hiding in a home in Kabul knowing that the Taliban were coming for way. The only way of escape is to somehow get to the airport, board a plane, and flee the country.

But there is something far worse than the wrath of the Taliban, that is the wrath of almighty God. But **no mere man** can save you from the wrath of God. The **United States government** cannot save you from the wrath of God. The **United States military** cannot save you from the wrath of God. Not even the **Navy SEALs** can save you from the wrath of God.

You cannot flee from the wrath of God by running away from God. Only God can save you from Himself, from His wrath. God, whom we have provoked to anger by our sins, is the One who has given Jesus to save us from His wrath. Jesus, in His death on the cross for our sins, satisfied the wrath of God. I exhort you, flee to Jesus. Run to Him for salvation. He is **the only ark of safety** in the flood of God’s wrath. He is **the only shelter** in the storm of God’s wrath.

We are saved from the wrath of God, by the grace of God, through faith in the Son of God, who died for the enemies of God, to make us the righteousness of God, to give us the peace of God.

Beloved, the wrath of God is what makes the gospel necessary. God is righteous. We are unrighteous. But in Christ there is salvation from wrath. It is only when you feel the weight of God’s wrath, will Jesus be supremely precious to you. In Jesus there is forgiveness and righteousness.

Charles Spurgeon, “Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.”