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The Wrath of God, Part 1

Now we come to a very important, yet much neglected topic: The Wrath of God. This is not a very popular subject today! In fact, had I asked you, "What comes to mind when you think of God?" Many most likely would have responded with "Love"- and that with good cause...

John 3:16a, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son..."

1 John 4:8b, "...God is love."

We praise God for His love. Yet realize that God's wrath and the punishment of hell are one of the top two most frequently discussed subjects by Christ. A consistent picture which emerges from the Bible about God is that while indeed He is a loving God, He also is an angry God who does and will condemn! For example, we read in...

Exodus 4:14, "Then the anger of the Lord burned..."

Deuteronomy 9:8, "...and the Lord was so angry with you that He would have destroyed you."

2 Kings 17:18, "So the Lord was very angry..."

Psalm 7:11, "God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day."

Psalm 80:4, "O Lord God of hosts, how long wilt Thou be angry..."

John 2:15, speaking of Christ, "And He made a scourge of cords, and drove *them* all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables."

Romans 2:5, "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God."

Hebrews 3:11, "...I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

Revelation 6:16-17, "And they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?'"

Truly God is angry. And as ones in the know, it behooves us to understand this important topic and reality. Toward that end, realize that there is perhaps no better passage to understand God's Wrath than the one we are examining; Romans 1:18-3:20 is a dissertation on the anger of God. These sixty-four verses discuss God's wrath!

The Nature of God's Wrath

For the next few of weeks we are going to begin looking at this passage in the hopes of obtaining a better understanding of The Wrath of God! We are going to begin with Romans 1:18 and Paul's introduction to this incredible theme. Notice with me the nature of God's wrath.

Romans 1:18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."¹

While this is an accurate translation, unfortunately today it is a misleading one. To us, wrath denotes an emotion characterized by the loss of self-control and an intense concern for selfish interests. Yet, this has no part of what constitutes Biblical wrath.

In the Bible, ὀργή/*orga* (wrath) refers to settled indignation. It is the opposite of "blowing up." Now this is not to say that it does not include a subjective element, for it does. When used of God it speaks not just of punishment; it also is a holy revulsion of God's being against the objects of His wrath. Thus to say "the wrath of God" is not only to say something about what God does, but also about what HE IS in doing it! And so, when used of God it carries with it the twofold idea of...

- Judicial Punishment.
- Displeasure/Anger.

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

God's Wrath is Unique

With this definition in mind, let's turn to our text where we learn three things about the nature of God's wrath. First God's wrath is unique. Paul begins with "for the wrath of God." The first thing I want you to notice is that the wrath referenced here is unlike anything we know of in the present world for it is the wrath of a transcendent Being. It is the wrath OF GOD! Man's anger is usually tainted by sin. And if it is righteous, it is the expression of an imperfect, irrational, and unrighteous individual. In contrast, God's anger is the expression of a Being so unlike us that finite creatures find it difficult to describe Him.

Isaiah 6:1-3, "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.'"

When it comes to understanding the holiness of God this passage is quite instructive. Around 740 BC, Isaiah was given a vision of the glory of God in which he beheld the angels endeavoring to cope with the holiness of God. What do they do? They cry day and night, "Holy! Holy! Holy!"

Now what is significant about this passage is that the angels of this text are morally blameless beings; they are without sin. Accordingly, if holiness simply denoted the state of being sinless, these angels would not be floored by God. That these angels are dumbfounded indicates that the holiness of God speaks NOT primarily of His moral purity, BUT His transcendency; the fact that He is different from anything and everything in creation.

That is the God with whom we have to do! We see it in Ezekiel when we behold the struggle of Ezekiel in describing God:

Ezekiel 1:26-28, "Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something / resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something / like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something / like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord..."

A W. Tozer, commenting on this passage, said this:

"...When the prophet Ezekiel saw heaven opened and beheld visions of God, he found himself looking at that which he had no language to describe. What he was seeing was wholly different from anything he had ever known before, so he fell back upon the language of resemblance. 'As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire'...

"Strange as this language is, it still does not create the impression of unreality. One gathers that the whole scene is very real but entirely alien to anything men know on earth. So, in order to convey an idea of what he sees, the prophet must employ such words as 'likeness,' 'appearance,'

‘as it were,’ and ‘the likeness of the appearance.’ Even the throne becomes ‘the appearance of a throne’ and He that sits upon it, though like a man, is so *unlike* one that He can be described only as ‘the likeness of the appearance of a man.’”² (*The Knowledge of The Holy*, p. 15)

Because God is holy, He is wholly incomprehensible to the finite mind. Without the work of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God in revealing things that about God which can be said to be true i.e., His attributes, we could not know Him. Isaiah speaking of the non-Christians states that God’s

Isaiah 55:8-9, “... thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.’”

And so when we think of God, we must realize that we are thinking about that which is beyond us, that which we could never comprehend except for the grace of God. That is what is meant by the attribute of Holiness.

In light of this, consider the words of our passage again, “For the wrath of God!...” I hope you see that Paul is talking about something which is not seen on earth. Truly, the passion which is ascribed to man called anger is infinitely removed from what the word denotes when used in reference to God. God’s wrath is the only response that a Holy Being could have toward evil! God could not be holy and tolerate sin. In the words of Habakkuk:

Habakkuk 1:13, “Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor...”

Thomas Watson wrote this about God’s wrath:

“Is God so infinitely holy? Then see how unlike to God sin Isaiah.. No wonder, therefore, that God hates sin, being so unlike to him, nay, so contrary to him; it strikes at his holiness.”

God’s Wrath: an Essential Part of the Gospel

And so the first and foremost thing we must realize when we speak of God’s wrath is that it is holy! It is NOT irrational, imperfect, or sinful. Rather, it is the action and disposition of a transcendent Being so awesome that He is incomprehensible to our pea-brain, fallen minds except by grace. And yet notice God’s wrath is an essential part of the gospel. Once again consider Paul’s words:

Roman 1:18, “for the wrath of God...”

This word “for” literally is translated as, “I say this because.” It is a “connecting word” which explains the basis or rationale of a preceding thought. As such it is an important word, and therefore must NOT be left untranslated (as in the NIV). Here, the word indicates that the Gospel which you and I have come to know and love (Romans 1:16-17) rests upon the truth of this section (Romans 1:18-3:20). Notice the flow of Paul’s thought.

² A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, page 15

- In Romans 1:15 Paul expresses his zeal for preaching the gospel to those in Rome.
- In Romans 1:16 Paul explains why he was so zealous- he wasn't ashamed!
- In Romans 1:16b-17 Paul gives an explanation for why he wasn't ashamed of the gospel in which he proclaimed the glorious truth that through the gospel, God's right-standing is given to the sinner.

It is at this point we read, "For- I say this because- the wrath of God...", whereby Paul gives the rationale/an explanation/the basis for the necessity of the gospel. From this we conclude that without an understanding of the wrath of God, the gospel would be irrelevant! See if God is only love, who needs salvation? The reality of the wrath of God is an essential part of the Gospel. It is what makes the gospel, good news!

Now one of the great tragedies of much of evangelicalism today is the lack of preaching and teaching on the subject of God's wrath. Much talk about the "abundant life" in Christ, the joy and blessing of salvation, and the peace with God that faith in Christ brings. And while the gospel does bring all of this, that is only half of the picture! If the gospel is to be understood, the truth of these verses; Romans 1:18-3:20, must be included. So says Paul! Truly...

- Before a cure means anything, a disease has to be recognized and identified.
- Salvation means being saved from real peril!

And it is the Cross that illustrates this peril! In fact, if you and I took from the cross the excess baggage which has been piled upon it throughout the ages, we'd view it in an entirely different manner. Many have the view that Christ was crucified because crucifixion just so happened to be the preferred method of execution in His day. *"If Christ lived in our day, He probably would have died by lethal injection."* Yet, that is false! The Scripture plainly teaches that Christ was crucified "from the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:19-20). Christ's crucifixion was according to the "predetermined plan of God" (Acts 2:23). It was God's plan from the beginning that Christ should hang on a tree! Accordingly, 1,500 years prior to the time Christ walked the earth God gave the following command...

Deuteronomy 21:22-23, "And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is cursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance."

Based on this passage it was well understood in Christ's day among the Jews that cursed people were to be hung on a cross. In other words,

- Crucifixion did not make a man cursed.
- Rather, it was because a man was cursed that he was hung on a tree!

That is why a crucified Messiah was a stumbling block to the Jews.³ According to their thinking that Christ was crucified didn't mean that Christ became a curse; rather, it meant that He was accursed. Christ stood condemned. That is why He was hung on a tree.

³ Compare 1 Corinthians 1:23

Now when it came to Christ their thinking was flawed. Christ indeed did become accursed as He hung on the tree.⁴ Yet in the case of man, they were right on...

Galatians 3:10, "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.'"

Do you understand the significance of this verse in relation to Deuteronomy 21? On account of sin, mankind stands cursed of God and so are the rightful objects of God's wrath! What therefore ought to be done with sinful man? He ought to be hung on a tree!

So when you think of the cross, what should come to your mind? First and foremost, not your salvation, but the judgment of God due to you on account of your sin! The cross is the place of God's judgment and so the terrifying fate that awaits every man on account of their being under a curse! Without this understanding, the cross of Christ today is seen, even on the part of some Christians, as the unfortunate fate of a morally upright teacher! Walter Chantry put it this way:

"Our Lord's wretched suffering must be tragic and senseless in the eyes of any who have no reverent esteem for the perfect commandments. On the cross Jesus was satisfying the just demands of the law against sinners. If sinners are unaware of the decalogue's requirements for themselves, they will see no personal significance in Christ's broken body and shed blood. Without knowledge of the condemnation of God's holy law, the cross will draw sympathy but not saving faith from sinners."⁵

Let us not be ashamed of the wrath of God or downplay the message. It is against the backdrop of God's wrath that Paul asserted the glorious truth that the right-standing of God is given to the sinner in Christ. Truly, God's wrath is an essential part in understanding the gospel!

God's Wrath is Able to be Averted

And this brings us to the final point in our introduction. God's wrath is able to be averted. As we discuss God's wrath, don't miss this point, for this is the focus of Romans 1:18-3:20!

Again Paul's purpose for this entire section is to prove the glorious truth that he just referenced in Romans 1:17, "He who is righteous by faith shall live!"

How can we know this for sure? How is it that the gospel is necessary for salvation? How is it that other religions don't lead to God? Maybe we've become a little too defensive or exclusive!

According to Romans 1:18-3:20, "He who seeks to be righteous by works shall perish for he is under a curse!" In other words, there is absolutely no other way for a man to stand before God and NOT be condemned. All have sinned (Romans 3:23)! Accordingly, if a man is to spend eternity with God, they must be given the right-standing of another!

⁴ Compare Galatians 3:13; Matthew 27:45-46

⁵ Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel*, page 37

So in the attempt to give the remedy for the ill that plagues mankind; sin, Paul brings his readers face to face with the truth of their situation before God...

- All are under His wrath,
- All have fallen short of God's glory!
- All stand condemned before Him!

And so the point of this section is not to destroy, tear down, or crush the sinner. Rather, it is to lead any and all to the truth that God's wrath is able to be averted in Christ! "He who is righteous by faith shall live" (Romans 1:17)! In fact, this is where Paul ends this section:

Romans 3:21-22a, "But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe..."

So while God's wrath...

- Is Unique.
- Is an essential part of the Gospel.

Recognize that God's wrath also can be averted in Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

In light of everything we have seen this morning, I ask you, "What is your relationship to God's wrath?"

- Has the Wrath of God been averted from your life?
- Is there a cross and so judgment on the horizon of your life?
- Is God angry with you?

I appeal to you this morning, remain no longer under the wrath of God! When you wrong another person, the relationship is only restored when: (1) Restitution is made, and... (2) Forgiveness is granted.

Accordingly, do you realize that your sin has offended God? Do you realize that outside of Christ your very existence is an affront to the majesty and dignity of God?

Go to God today! Confess your sin...

- Confess that you have rebelled against His authority!
- Confess that you have sinned against Him.
- Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29b)!
- And then rely upon Christ's work on the cross as the payment for your sin!

John 1:12-13, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor

of the will of man, but of God.”

If you will so believe, you “shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.” (Romans 5:9)! Now in the case of those in whose life the wrath of God has been averted, how do we apply this passage? Let me ask you, “Are you living in light of this grace or are you taking God’s forgiveness lightly?” You see it is possible to have received the blessing of no longer living under God’s wrath and yet take much of this for granted!

How do we take God’s forgiveness for granted? By willingly participating in those activities which incur God’s wrath. Paul makes this point in Colossians.

Colossians 3:5-6, “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. [Why ought we the child of God to abstain from these things?] For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come.”

God’s wrath has been averted in your life because of the work of Christ on your behalf. Now that it has been averted, Paul is saying as Christians, ought we to participate or give ourselves to activities which outside of Christ merit God’s wrath? God has said, “My wrath rests upon this kind of living.” Ought we to know the forgiveness of Christ and then give ourselves to a life which without grace is condemned before God?

You must see that to participate willingly in the very activities which incur God’s wrath on the part of the non-believer is to betray a heart of contempt for...

- God’s wrath.
- Christ’s life and death.
- God’s grace.

Imagine with me the following scenario. An individual abuses his body with alcohol such that he ruins his liver. Now you’ve known this person for years because he grew up in your neighborhood, you watched him as a child, a young man, in college, and then married with children and the like. He is a wonderful man except for his alcoholism. Well the day came where he “bottomed out.” He became sober and so was placed on a waiting list for a new liver.

Three years into this neighbor’s wait, with his life now hanging by a thread, one of your children is killed in a car accident. His blood type matched that of the neighbor and so you volunteer your child’s own liver. The operation is a success and within a year the man is healthy, vibrant, alive!

Now imagine, going out one day and seeing a bottle in his hand! Coming up to the man and saying, “What are you doing? My child gave his life for you. Are you now going to abuse his liver?”

He responding with, “Hey, a little alcohol won’t hurt his liver. Besides, if I ruin this one, I’ll simply dry up, get placed on the donor list, and get a new one. It’s not a big deal!”

Christ died that you might live. Accordingly, let us not merely...

- Be saddened by the cross.
- Be filled with remorse because your Lord and Savior died an agonizing and cruel death.
- And then willingly and purposefully participate in immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed. To do this is to betray the cross of Christ!

Rather may the cross and the grace and mercy of God melt our hearts such that we live to honor and glorify the Lord by not forgiving another as we have been forgiven.

Matthew 18:21-23, "Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves...'"

You know the parable. The first servant was forgiven multiple lifetimes of debt- he owed 10,000 talents! But then he turned around and placed a fellow servant into Debtor's Prison on account of a 100 denarii debt. Now there are a couple of things that stand out here.

- The differing debts, vv. 24, 28. The distance that separates you from the one who has offended you is minuscule compared to the distance that separates you and God. And yet God has forgiven you!
- The obligation to actively forgive, vv. 32-33. Our forgiveness in the kingdom is not to be granted only after the one offended seeks forgiveness. Rather, we are to seek out and forgive.

A loose translation of Matthew reads, "Is not mercy your lasting obligation?"

Matthew 5:23-24, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."

And again to be saddened by the cross; filled with remorse that your Lord and Savior died an agonizing and cruel death, all on account that you might be forgiven; floored over the love of Christ which has forgiven us 10,000 lifetimes of sin; and then refuse to forgive a brother or sister for something far less offensive truly is to take God's grace lightly by looking with arrogance upon another sinner!

Luke 18:9-14a, "And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'" But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other...'"

You all know this text well. However what makes this passage personally striking is realizing that if we were living in Christ's day, we'd be the Pharisees. Not because we are hypocrites, but because they were the theologically conservative people of God at the time. And hence as he fell into arrogance, so

also will be the temptation in our own lives.

So how is it that an individual who "...[bore] the name 'Jew,' and rel[ied] upon the Law, and boast[ed] in God, and kn[ew] *His* will, and approv[ed] the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law" (Romans 2:17-18) could look down upon another?

Obviously this Pharisee looked lightly upon God's grace! He saw others imperfections, but he did not see his own, and so did not see that he was ever and always in desperate need of it. Family of God, let us not look lightly upon Christ, His sacrifice, and His grace. But may it move us unto a life of humble service in His name.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 13, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.