

Romans: The Good News of God

Reasons for the Wrath of God

Romans 1:19-23

Rev. Freddy Fritz

April 1, 2007

Reasons for the Wrath of God

Scripture

Let us continue our study in Romans 1:18-23 about the wrath of God. Last week in Romans 1:18 we noted several *features* about the wrath of God. Today, in Romans 1:19-23, we are going to see several *reasons* for the wrath of God. Let's read Romans 1:18-23, noting that our text for today is Romans 1:19-23:

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ **since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.** ²⁰ **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.**

²¹ **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.** ²² **Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools** ²³ **and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.** (Romans 1:19-23)

Introduction

“We don't need to evangelize the people of the world who have never heard the message of salvation. We only need to announce to them that they're already saved.” So says the head of the department of evangelism for a major denomination in America.

That leader reflects the rising tide of universalism, the belief that, because God is too loving and gracious to send anyone to hell, everyone will ultimately get to heaven. If that were true, there obviously would be no place for warning sinners of the approaching day of wrath in the proclamation of the gospel.

The apostle Paul, however, is determined for us to know that before we can understand the *good news* of the gospel we must first understand the *bad news* of the gospel, that before we can understand the grace of God we must first understand the wrath of God, that before we can understand the meaning of the death of Christ we must first understand why our sin made that death necessary, that before we can understand how loving, merciful, and gracious God is we must first see how rebellious, sinful, and guilty we are.

Tragically, even many evangelicals have come to soft-pedal the theme of God's wrath and judgment and hell. Even so much as a minimum mention of hell has been quietly removed from much of today's preaching. And the wrath (or anger) of God, when mentioned at all, is frequently depersonalized, as if somehow it is worked out automatically by some deistic operation in which God himself or we ourselves are not directly involved!

Many people are inclined to wonder if we really deserve such a harsh fate. After all, no person asks to be born. Why then, say many, should a person who had nothing to do with his own birth spend eternity in hell for being sinful?

The question, "Why is *everyone* born under the wrath of God?" deserves attention. It is this question that the apostle Paul answers in Romans 1:19-23, where he explains why God is justified in his wrath against *all* people.

Lesson

In Romans 1:19-23, Paul gives three reasons why the Romans, and every person born except the Lord Jesus Christ, fully deserve the wrath of God. These reasons may be identified as man's rejection, man's rationalization, and man's religion.

I. Man's Rejection (1:19-21)

The first reason why God is justified in his wrath against sin-

ners is because of man's rejection of God's revelation of himself to all mankind. The Jews enjoyed a "special" revelation from God in that he had given them the Scriptures. But *all* people have rejected God's "natural" revelation of himself in creation and providence.

A. *The Fact of Revelation (1:19)*

Paul's point is that *all* people are rightly and deservedly under the wrath of God **since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them** (1:19).

All people have evidence of God, and what their physical senses can perceive of him their inner senses can understand to some extent. *All* people know something of the reality and truth of God. We are all responsible for a proper response to that revelation of God. Any wrong response is "inexcusable."

A disease left Helen Keller blind and deaf as a very young girl. Her family hired Anne Sullivan to take care of Helen. Through Anne's tireless and selfless efforts, Helen finally learned to communicate through touch and even learned to talk. When Anne first told Helen about God, the girl's response was that she already knew about him—she just did not know his name.¹

Helen Keller illustrates that people know something about God but also that no-one knows him savingly apart from further revelation about Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, God has given enough revelation about himself so that no-one will ever be able to say when they stand before God, "God! I had no clue that you existed!"

B. *The Content of Revelation (1:20)*

But what is it that God has revealed about himself to us? Paul tells us that **since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities . . . have been clearly seen** (1:20).

¹ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1905), 368-74.

The particular **invisible qualities** that we can perceive in part through our natural senses are God's **eternal power and divine nature** (1:20).

God's **eternal power** refers to his never-failing omnipotence, which is reflected in the awesome creation which that **power** both brought into being and sustains.

God's **divine nature** refers to his character and attributes, especially to his communicable attributes.

Noted Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge said, "God therefore has never left himself without a witness. His existence and perfections have ever been so manifested that his rational creatures are bound to acknowledge and worship him as the true and only God."²

God's natural revelation of himself is not obscure or selective, observable only by a few unusually perceptive individuals who are specially gifted. God's revelation of himself through creation can be **clearly seen** by all, **being understood from what has been made**.

Even in ancient times, long before the telescope and microscope were invented, the greatness of God was evident both in the vastness and in the tiny intricacies of creation. People could look at the stars and discover the fixed order of their orbits. They could observe a small seed reproduce itself into a giant tree, exactly like the one from which it came. They could see the wonderful cycles of the seasons, the rain, and the snow. They witnessed the marvel of human birth and the beauty of the sunrise and sunset, so that the Psalmist cried out that "the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1)!

We live in an incredible world that has been wonderfully designed and marvelously created by God.

When the last tubes of the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River for the Pennsylvania Railroad were about to be joined in 1927, a young civil engineer named Richardson was chosen for the

² Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983 reprint), 37.

task because of his remarkable ability to make an accurate survey that would bring the tube ends perfectly together. So accurate was his work that when the tubes were joined the two ends were less than one-eighth of an inch off-center!

But with God the accuracy is so complete that planets, for example, can travel not the few thousand feet of the length of a tunnel, but through a universe so vast as to be almost beyond human comprehension and at such speed as virtually defies description. For example, consider the fact that the earth is 25,000 miles in circumference, weighs 6 septillion, 588 sextillion tons, and hangs unsupported in space. It spins at 1,000 miles per hour with absolute precision and flies through space around the sun at the speed of 1,000 miles per minute in an exact orbit 580 million miles long!

Now, except to a mind willfully closed to the obvious, it is inconceivable that such accuracy, intricacy and harmony could have developed by any means but by that of a Master Designer who rules the universe. It would be far more reasonable to think that the separate pieces of a watch could be shaken in a bag and eventually become a dependable timepiece than to think that the world could have evolved into its present state by blind chance.

Henry Ward Beecher, the pre-Civil War Congregational minister, possessed a beautiful globe depicting the various constellations and stars of the heavens. Robert Ingersoll, the famous, controversial agnostic, visiting Beecher one day, admired the globe and asked who had made it.

“Who made it?” said Beecher, seizing the opportunity to challenge his guest’s well-known agnosticism. “Why, nobody made it; it just happened!”

Beecher was implying that just as the globe was clearly designed and made by someone so also our world was designed and made by God.

And God has revealed himself clearly to all people through his creation, **so that men are without excuse** when they find themselves under the wrath of God.

C. *The Act of Rejection (1:21)*

Paul says in verse 21 that **although they knew God** through this natural, general revelation, people still reject him.

Although men and women are innately conscious of God's eternal power and divine nature, they are just as innately inclined to reject that knowledge.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, former pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, made this powerful statement:

Will God give man brains to see these things and will man then fail to exercise his will toward that God? The sorrowful answer is that both these things are true. God will give a man brains to smelt iron and make a hammer head and nails. God will grow a tree and give man strength to cut it down and brains to fashion a hammer handle from its wood. And when man has the hammer and the nails, God will put out His hand and let man drive nails through it and place Him on a cross in the supreme demonstration that men are without excuse.³

In verse 21, Paul mentions four ways in which people demonstrate their rejection of God. Let me mention them briefly.

First, people reject God by not glorifying him as God. Paul says that **they neither glorified him as God (1:21a)**. **God** alone is to be **glorified**. As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* declares, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever" (*Q/A 1*). Man was created to glorify God, and for man to fail to give God glory is therefore the ultimate affront to his glory.

After they were created in God's own image, Adam and Eve continually experienced God's presence and glory. They communed directly with him and they praised him and acknowledged his glory. But they sinned by disobeying God's command and sought to gain glory for themselves. Sin brought separation from

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans publishing Co., 1953), 245.

God, and Adam and Eve no longer sought God's presence or yearned to bring him glory. Ever since that time, fallen man has sought to avoid God and to deny his glory. Instead, man seeks glory for himself.

Second, people reject God by not giving thanks to God. Paul says that they neither glorified him as God **nor gave thanks to him** (1:21b). Although God is the very source of every good thing we possess—rain, sun, food—we fail to thank God because we do not want to glorify him nor even acknowledge his existence.

Third, as a consequence of not glorifying God or giving thanks to him, people's **thinking became futile** (1:21c). Man's **thinking** about spiritual matters is **futile**, useless, and pointless.

Finally, people's rejection of God is seen in the fact that **their foolish hearts were darkened** (1:21d). The **foolish heart** that rejects and dishonors God does not become enlightened and freed, as some claim, but rather becomes spiritually **darkened** and further enslaved to sin. The person who forsakes God forsakes truth.

And so God's wrath is rightly upon those who reject him. God's wrath is upon those who reject his revelation of himself to them.

II. Man's Rationalization (1:22)

The second reason why God is justified in his wrath against sinners is because of man's rationalization.

In rejecting God's clear revelation of himself through his creation, people failed to glorify God and give him thanks, became futile in their thinking and spiritually foolish and darkened in their hearts. Trying to justify themselves, they rationalized their sin, just as fallen man still does today. **Although they claimed to be wise** about God, about the universe, and about themselves, **they became fools** instead.

Centuries earlier, king David declared that men who deny God and his truth are in fact fools (Psalm 14:1; 53:1), and it is that

very foolishness that deludes them into thinking that they are **wise**.

When evangelist D. L. Moody was conducting evangelistic meetings, he frequently faced hecklers who strongly disagreed with him. In the final service of one campaign, an usher handed the famous preacher a note as he entered the auditorium. It was actually from an atheist who had been giving Mr. Moody a great deal of trouble. The evangelist, however, thought that it was an announcement, so he quieted the large audience and prepared to read it. Opening the folded piece of paper he found scrawled in large print only one word: “Fool!”

The colorful preacher was equal to the occasion. Said Moody, “I have just been handed a memo which contains the single word—‘Fool!’ This is most unusual. I’ve often heard of those who have written letters and forgotten to sign their names, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard of anyone who signed his name and then forgot to write the letter!”

Taking advantage of the unique situation, Moody promptly changed his sermon text to Psalm 14:1: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God!’”

Friends, there is a God. And he has revealed himself to us in creation and also in his Word. Anyone who claims to be wise by insisting that there is no God is in fact a fool, and is rightly under the wrath of God.

III. Man’s Religion (1:23)

The third reason why God is justified in his wrath against sinners is because of man’s religion.

Man by nature is a religious being. We know that because of what God’s Word tells us, but we can also see that empirically. As far as I know, every culture in the world has some form of religion.

Paul tells us that in spite of God’s revelation of himself in creation, men and women have **exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles** (1:23). In their moral rebellion against

their Creator, men and women reject the holy Creator for the unholy creation.

But God scathingly mocks those who **exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles** in a passage in Isaiah 44:14-17:

He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god."

Lest we think that we have risen above such crude idolatry, we have only to consider our own idols. Remember, an idol is anything or anyone we hold in supreme place in our system of values. Our idols are: sex, workaholism, power, prestige, perfectionism, sports, education, entertainment, celebrities, success, materialism, beauty, image, and so on.

Many years ago J. H. Clinch wrote these provocative lines:

And still from Him we turn away,
And fill our hearts with worthless things;
The fires of greed melt the clay,
And forth the idol springs!
Ambition's flame, and passion's heat,
By wondrous alchemy transmute earth's dross
To raise some gilded brute to fill Jehovah's seat.

By nature we are religious beings. We must worship someone or something. If we do not worship the true God, we rightly deserve to fall under his wrath. Let us not create idols to take the

place of God in our lives. Let us cast off our idols and worship God alone.

Conclusion

God's wrath is rightly on sinful men and women who, though they have God's revelation of himself in creation, nevertheless reject him, rationalize their rejection and create their own religion.

The May 1984 *National Geographic* showed through color photos and drawings the swift and terrible destruction that wiped out the Roman Cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 A.D. The explosion of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden that the residents were killed while in their routine: men and women were at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, and slaves at toil. They died amid volcanic ash and superheated gasses. Even family pets suffered the same quick and final fate.

The saddest part is that these people did not have to die. Scientists confirm what ancient Roman writers record—weeks of rumblings and shakings preceded the actual explosion. Even an ominous plume of smoke was clearly visible from the mountain days before the eruption. If only they had been able to read and respond to Vesuvius' warning!

There are similar "rumblings" spiritually today: murder, hatred, sexual immorality, divorce, greed, bitterness, envy, jealousy, etc. These things point to a coming Day of Judgment (Matthew 24). People need not be caught unprepared. God warns and provides an escape to those who will heed the rumblings.

Last week I said that all people are either the recipients of the wrath of God or the recipients of the grace of God. We escape the wrath of God by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, who bore the wrath of God in our place. When we trust in Jesus alone, we are the recipients of the grace of God and not the recipients of the wrath of God.

Are you, today, a recipient of the wrath of God or a recipient of the grace of God? Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181
3. www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz

Please give your input and leave your feedback at websites 2 and 3 when requested to do so. This helps with evaluation and planning of sermons.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

Adapted from “The Precious Blood” (p. 41) in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*:

Blessed Lord Jesus, before your cross I kneel and see the heinousness of my sin, my iniquity that cause you to be “made a curse,” and the evil that excites the severity of divine wrath.

Show me the enormity of my guilt by the crown of thorns, the pierced hands and feet, the bruised body, the dying cries.

Your blood is the blood of incarnate God, its worth infinite, its value beyond all thought.

Infinite must be the evil and guilt that demands such a price.

Sin is my malady, my monster, my foe, my viper, born in my birth, alive in my life, strong in my character, dominating my faculties, following me as a shadow, intermingling with my every thought, my chain that holds me captive in the empire of my soul.

Sinner that I am, why should the sun give me light, the air supply breath, the earth bear my tread, its fruits nourish me, its creatures subserve my ends?

Yet your compassions yearn over me, your heart hastens to my rescue, your love endured my curse, your mercy bore my deserved stripes.

Let me walk humbly in the lowest depths of humiliation, bathed in your blood, tender of conscience, triumphing gloriously as an heir of salvation.

And all of this we pray in your wonderful name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.