

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **Wrath Stored Up**

*Romans 2:5*

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# Wrath Stored Up

## Scripture

Let's read Romans 2:5:

**<sup>5</sup> But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. (Romans 2:5)**

## Introduction

In Romans 2:5 we come for a second time to the idea of God's wrath, and for the second time we need to defend wrath as a proper element of God's character. It is strange that this should be so.

Several years ago newspapers reported the discovery of a "house of horrors" in north Philadelphia. A man named Gary Heidnik had been luring prostitutes and other rootless women to his home, imprisoning and torturing them, and finally killing some. When his crimes were uncovered, two women were found chained to the walls of the basement, and body parts of others were discovered in Heidnik's refrigerator. Heidnik was criminally insane, of course.

But the interesting thing about this case is that much of the outrage it engendered was directed, not so much at Heidnik, who was obviously insane, but at the police, who had been alerted to the strange goings-on in the house earlier by the neighbors but had done nothing. The police maintained that until they were finally told about Heidnik by a woman who had been in his home but had escaped, they did not have "probable cause" to interfere.

The position of the police may have been technically and legally correct, of course. But the point I am making is that people

naturally feel that evil demands both intervention and outrage, and they are deeply upset if this does not happen. If nothing is done or if the situation is allowed to continue unchallenged for a long time, the outrage is intensified!

Why then are we unwilling to grant the rightness of a similar outrage to God? One possible reason is that we consider our sins to be excusable—forgetting that in the sight of the holy God they are no different from those of Gary Heidnik. Our sins are measured not by our own relative and wavering standards of good and evil, but by God’s absolute and utterly upright criteria.

The first time we came to the idea of the wrath of God in Romans, we were at the beginning of the first great section of Paul’s letter. There Paul wrote in Romans 1:18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” This is a thematic verse and therefore very important, for it is saying that the wrath of God is not something merely saved up until some long-delayed but final day of judgment, but rather is something that God has been revealing to us even now. Romans 2:5 is going to say that there is also a day of wrath to come, but the first thing Paul says about God’s wrath (in Romans 1:18) is that it is *already* being revealed from heaven.

This means that the wrath of God is a very real thing. Moreover, we can know the certainty of a future day of wrath by noting the past and present revelation of that wrath.

How has the wrath of God been revealed? The great Bible commentator Robert Haldane says:

It was revealed when the sentence of death was first pronounced, the earth cursed, and man driven out of the earthly paradise, and afterward by such examples of punishment as those of the deluge, and the destruction of the cities of the plain by fire from heaven. . . . But, above all, the wrath of God was revealed from heaven when the Son of God came down to manifest the divine character, and when that wrath was displayed in his sufferings and death, in a manner more awful than by all the tokens God had be-

fore given of his displeasure against sin. Besides this, the future and eternal punishment of the wicked is now declared in terms more solemn and explicit than formerly. Under the new dispensation, there are two revelations given from heaven, one of wrath, the other of grace.<sup>1</sup>

I don't know a statement regarding the nature of the revelation of God's wrath that is more complete or accurate than this statement by Haldane.

And yet, in Romans 1, Paul's point is that the wrath of God is being revealed to us chiefly in the debilitating downward drag of sin upon our lives. We think that when we sin we can sin "just a little bit." But we cannot! Sin captures us and pulls us down relentlessly, until—if we are allowed to continue in sin long enough—we end up calling what is good, evil and what is evil, good. And we perish utterly!

That means that the moral turmoil and chaos of the world, including our own personal world is evidence that the wrath of God is no fiction. This is something to be gravely concerned about.

## Lesson

Today, I want to examine several aspects of the wrath of God. I would like us to notice the following:

1. Wrath is deserved,
2. Wrath is proportionate to sin,
3. Wrath is certain, and
4. Wrath is just.

### I. Wrath Is Deserved

In Romans 2:5, Paul's first point is that the wrath of God toward the sin of men and women is deserved.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing Co., 55-56).

That should be evident by now, of course—at least if we have understood the argument of Romans 1. God’s wrath is deserved, because our ignorance of God is a willful ignorance and our refusal to seek him out and worship him is a willful refusal. We have already seen that God has revealed his existence and power in nature and that this alone should be sufficient to lead every person on the face of the earth to give thanks to God. But we do not do it, and the fact that we do not do it is proof that we do not want to do it.

But the case is even stronger than this, which is what Paul is chiefly teaching in Romans 2. Romans 1 declared God’s wrath on the basis of the evidence for the existence of God in nature, which we refuse to acknowledge. Romans 2:5 goes beyond this, speaking of the wrath of God as coming to us **because of our stubbornness and our unrepentant hearts.**

The word **unrepentant** takes us back to Romans 2:4. For in that verse Paul has spoken of two paths open to human beings as a result of God’s kindness, tolerance and patience. One path is the path of contempt for God’s blessings. The other path, the one Paul recommends, is repentance. Paul argues that the kindness, tolerance, and patience of God are to lead us to repentance.

But will this happen? Is it happening now? The answer appears in verse 5, where Paul speaks of our **stubbornness** and our **unrepentant** hearts. Apparently, the kindness, tolerance, and patience of God do not have the effect by themselves of leading people to repentance. Instead, those who have already suppressed the truth about God revealed in nature now add to their evil a hardening of their hearts against the kindness that has been bestowed upon them for their good.

So the wrath of God against us is deserved on two counts:

- (1) we have rejected God’s natural revelation; and
- (2) we have shown contempt for God’s kindness, tolerance and patience.

But, let me now move on to our second point.

## II. Wrath Is Proportionate to Sin

In my judgment, the most important teaching in this verse is that the wrath of God is proportionate to human sin, in the sense that those who sin much will be punished much and that those who sin less will be punished less.

There is an interesting image suggested by Paul's language at this point, for Paul speaks of the stubborn and unrepentant person **storing up wrath** for the day of God's judgment. It is the image of a greedy individual, a miser, who has been storing up wealth which, contrary to his expectations, is destined to destroy him. I think of this man as storing up a great horde of gold coins, placing them in an attic above his bed where he thinks no one will find them and where they will be safe. He keeps this up for years, amassing a great weight of gold. But one day, while he is sleeping and oblivious to his danger, this great weight of gold breaks through the ceiling of his bedroom, comes crashing down onto his bed, and kills him. He thought of his wealth as salvation, but it was death.

That is the way it is for those who pile sin upon sin and show contempt for God's kindness. They think of their sins as building up a life of future happiness and freedom. But each sin is actually a storing up of wrath.

Robert Haldane says, "The wicked will be punished according to the number and aggravation of their sins."<sup>2</sup>

This is true even of the good we receive and enjoy without giving proper thanks to God.

Each little indulgence of sin is a coin of wrath stored up. Each neglect of others is a saved-up ingot of anger. Each angry word, each selfish thought, each mean retort, each harmful act, is a piling up of wrath's treasures. Each pleasure enjoyed without a genuine thanks to God builds wrath. Each year of grace, each day enjoyed without the experience of God's swift and immediate

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<sup>2</sup> Haldane, 79-80.

judgment, each moment of indifference to the mercy of God, is wrath's accumulation.

If life has been good to you, you only increase your guilt and build a treasure of future punishment by ignoring and turning your back on God's kindness.

### III. Wrath Is Certain

There is another thought wrath in verse 5, and it is that the wrath of God against sin is certain.

People who spurn God's patience inevitably think that in the end they will somehow get free and escape what they deserve. That is what the people being addressed in this chapter were thinking. They looked at the debased moral practices of the heathen and concluded that they themselves would escape God's wrath because of their imagined superiority to the heathen in such things. But it is not so, Paul says. In fact, it is quite the contrary. Their very awareness of high moral standards, coupled with their refusal to repent of sin and come to God, intensifies their guilt and assures their final condemnation.

Certainty of judgment is seen in the phrase **the day of God's wrath**. Why is the time of the outpouring of the wrath of God called a **day**? In my opinion it is not because it is to unfold in what we would call a twenty-four-hour day, like the day of the invasion of the Normandy beaches in World War II, which one writer called *The Longest Day*. The Bible speaks of various judgments that may actually be spread out over a considerable period of time. The use of the word **day** in the phrase "day of wrath" is similar to its use in the phrase "the day of Jesus Christ." In that phrase the word encompasses the events of a thirty-three-year ministry.

Why, then, is the day of God's wrath called a **day**? It is because it is as fixed in God's calendar as any day you can mention—December 7, 1941, to give just one example. That **day** is determined! So when **the day** rolls around, the wrath of God *will* be poured out, whatever you or anyone else may hope to the contrary.

A great German preacher by the name of Walter Luthi wrote:

If the time should ever come (for these things are conceivable nowadays) when we should succeed in demonstrating that black is white and white is black, that good is evil and evil good, if we should ever be successful in invalidating the fundamental moral principles of the universe, so that sin were no longer hated and everyone took a fancy to evil, then there would still be a stronghold where evil would be hated, and that is heaven. And there would still be one who has sworn to fight the evil in the world to the last drop of his blood, and that is God, whose “wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men.”<sup>3</sup>

#### IV. Wrath Is Just

And finally, Romans 2:5 makes another point about wrath that we also need to see. God’s wrath is a just wrath, not arbitrary or petulant but rather according to **righteous judgment**.

When Paul mentions **judgment** he brings in thoughts of God’s law and reminds us that the judgment of God will be according to law. Indeed, as he is going to show, those who have done good—if there are any—will receive good from God, while those who have done evil will receive evil.

One problem with sin is that it leads to self-justification, so that anything that happens to us that we do not like is immediately perceived as being unjust, a reason to fault God for his ordering of the universe. The cry of the rebellious is always: “The only thing I want from God is justice.”

But God forbid that you should receive justice from God!

The justice of God will condemn you. And the terror of the very thought of justice is that God is indeed a just God. The God of all the earth does right, as Abraham well knew (cf. Genesis 18:25). Sin is punished now in large measure, and it will be punished fully

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans: An Exposition*, trans. Kurt Schoenenberger (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), 20-21.

and equitably in the life to come. Do not ask God for justice. Seek mercy. Seek it where salvation from the wrath of God alone may be found.

I remember when R. C. Sproul came to preach at the Chapel at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School when I was there as a seminary student. He was preaching on the passage in 2 Samuel 6 where David was bringing the ark of the covenant back to Israel from the Philistines. At one point the oxen stumbled. So, Uzzah reached out his hand and took hold of the ark of God in order to steady it. But the Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God. The Bible tells us that David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah. I remember Sproul saying that if we had been there we would demand justice from God. After all, it seemed so unfair that God should punish Uzzah for trying to protect the ark. And yet, Uzzah was disobeying God's explicit command that no-one touch the ark (Numbers 4:15). I can still picture Sproul then jumping up and down and proclaiming, "Never, never, never ask God for justice! Each of us deserves the wrath and condemnation of God. And justice will kill us. Ask God rather for mercy!"

### **Conclusion**

Where is that mercy to be found? If God's wrath is deserved by us, proportionate to our sin, as certain as the calendar, just, and even partially disclosed in the natural unfolding of the effects of sin in our lives, how can it possibly be avoided—since we *are* sinners?

The only way to avoid God's wrath is in Christ, who bore the full measure of the wrath of God in our place.

Do we doubt that God's wrath is real and threatening? If we do, we need only look at Jesus in the hours preceding his crucifixion. He was not like Socrates who calmly drank the hemlock that was to take his life. Jesus' soul was "troubled" (John 12:27), and

he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking that the “cup” God had prepared for him might be taken away (Matthew 26:36-44). Jesus was not afraid of death. He had as much courage in that respect as Socrates.

The reason Jesus trembled before death is that his death was not to be like the death of mere mortals. Jesus was not going to die for himself. He was going to die for others. He was going to take upon himself the full measure of the wrath of God that we deserve. He was to drink the cup of God’s wrath to the very dregs—in order that the justice of God might be satisfied and sinners might be spared.

And so it was!

The time came when Jesus was led away to be crucified. He was hung on the cross, midway between earth and heaven, a bridge between sinful man and a holy God. There he, who knew no sin, was made sin for us. There God’s wrath was poured out.

For centuries the wrath that men and women had been storing up had been accumulating—like coins in the attic or water behind a great dam. Oh, here and there a little of the flood of God’s judgment had sloshed out over the top as God reached the end of his patience in some small area, and a Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed or a Jerusalem was overthrown. But, for the most part, the wrath of God merely accumulated, growing higher and broader and deeper and increasingly more turbulent. Then Jesus died!

When he died the dam was opened, and the great weight of the accumulated wrath of God was poured out upon him. He took God’s wrath for us. He bore its impounded fury in our place. No wonder his righteous soul shrank back from death. He had never committed a single sin. He was spotless and without blame. Yet because he was blameless and because he was God, he was able to stand in the breach for us and secure our salvation.

God demonstrated clearly that he had secured our salvation! In Jerusalem the central feature in the temple was a room called the Most Holy Place. God was understood to dwell symbolically in that place. Before it hung a thick curtain, symbolizing the barrier that sin has raised between God in his holiness and us in our sin.

For anyone to penetrate beyond that barrier meant instant death, as occasionally happened, for the wrath of God must flame out against any sin that would intrude upon holiness. That curtain was torn in two when Jesus died. For centuries it had hung there, proclaiming that God was holy, that man was sinful, and that the way to God was therefore strictly barred. But now that Jesus had died for sin, taking the place of any who would trust him and receive the benefit of his sacrifice, the wrath of God was expended, the way was open, and there was nothing left but God's great love and kindness.

This is the gospel. It is what is open to you if you will approach God, not on the basis of your own good deeds or works, which can only condemn you, but on the basis of Christ's having borne the wrath of God in your place.

That wrath is thundering down the chasm of history toward the day of final judgment, and one day it must break upon you unless you stand before God in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther began his spiritual pilgrimage by fearing God's wrath and then came to find peace in Christ. But he never forgot the reality of the final judgment, and he always warned his hearers to flee from it to Christ. He said in one place, "The Last Day is called the day of wrath and of mercy, the day of trouble and of peace, the day of destruction and of glory."<sup>4</sup>

Luther was right. It must be one or the other. If it is to be a day of mercy and peace for you, rather than a day of wrath and trouble, it must be because you are trusting in Christ alone. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Words*, vol. 25, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Press, 1972), 176.



# 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

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**PRAYER:**

Our God in heaven, your Word tells us that you are a God of wrath. You are righteously angry with all sinners who reject you and violate your Law. You rightly execute your justice against non-repentant sinners.

But your Word also tells that you are a God of mercy. You have executed the sentence of death and judgment against the Lord Jesus Christ. You have also extended forgiveness to all who repent and seek your grace and mercy.

O Father, we desperately need your mercy. Enable us to repent in order to receive your mercy.

And then grant us the gift of faith so that we might trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of eternal life.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' 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.