

Romans: A Solid Foundation for Christian Living

Message 8: The Wonderful Wrath of God

Text: Romans 1:18-20

As we continue our study through *Romans: A Solid Foundation for Christian Living*, this morning we're going to take a good look at a very difficult passage of scripture. It's not difficult because of hard language. In fact, the Greek of Romans is among the most straightforward and understandable in the New Testament. Just translate it and it really interprets itself. Just go and do what it says. So that's not why it's hard. Nor is it hard because it conveys some deep theological truths flying above the heads of most of us. Again, when you read it, you find that Romans – though deep – is readily comprehensible. What problems we have with the teachings of Romans we have because we tend not to study it (only read a verse here and there). No, that's not why it's so hard. The reason why our passage for this morning is so difficult has to do with something more basic: we just don't like it. We don't want to hear it. Why? Because it's all about the wrath of God. And who wants to talk about or learn about the *wrath* of God. We'd much rather learn about His love, His care, His provision, all those warm and fuzzy truths about the Lord. And yet, here we are at Romans 1:18, and the apostle Paul begins his deepest description of the gospel of Christ by describing in detail God's wrath. Listen to what the Bible says (read vs. 18-20).

Now to understand what's going on here, go back with me to Romans 1:15. Paul here expresses his eagerness to preach the gospel to the believers in Rome. And the word *gospel* here literally means "good news." Paul's focus is on the good news of salvation through faith in Christ. And so, in the thesis statement for the letter, vs. 16, he says, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*" The good news of the gospel is God's power for salvation. And in vs. 17 he says, "*For in the gospel – good news – a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.*" In all this Paul is saying, get ready for a thorough presentation of the good news – what all takes place when God saves us.

Now at this point you would expect something else good: more good news, more blessing, maybe something about God's great love for us. But instead, Paul begins this great description of the gospel: the wrath of God is being revealed. And we go, "Huh? What's so good about that?" We don't want to travel that road. We don't want to learn about God's wrath.

But we must. In fact, by beginning his gospel presentation with God's wrath, Paul is affirming how important it is for us. You see, one cannot understand grace apart from God's wrath. One cannot understand salvation apart from it. See, as terrible as the wrath of God may be, there is something wonderful in it. I know. It's hard to conceive of wonderful and wrath in the same sentence.

And yet, here it is. There is some wonderful truths that are expressed in the truth of God's wrath. And the sooner we get hold of them, the more we will understand and appreciate the salvation available to us through Jesus Christ.

So what's so wonderful about God's wrath?

1. God's wrath reveals His holiness.

Vs. 18: "*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven...*"

Wrath means anger, but it is not the kind of anger people show (people get angry, often over trivial matters, and will often act out inappropriately). But God's anger is different. The word here speaks of a God-kind of anger, a divine wrath. What's different is that this anger is exercised in perfect holiness. God is holy, and there is one thing that cannot abide in His holiness, sin. In fact, His wrath is directed toward sin. It's the logical response of a holy God toward sin (We might complain, but we value this in real life – people who go out on a limb to speak out against the problems of their communities). Well, we should especially value this trait in God, because it affirms His holiness.

Holiness is the penultimate quality of God's nature. All His other qualities rest on His holiness. In 1 Samuel 2:2, Hannah praised the Lord, rejoicing that He answered her prayer, saying, "*There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one like you.*" In Psalm 99:9, the Bible says, "*Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.*" Everything about how we relate to the Lord and how He relates to us rests on His holiness.

- Because He is holy, we know He is good (Ps. 31:19, *How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you.*)
- Because He is holy, we know He is true (Rom. 4:21, *Abraham was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*)
- Because He is holy, we can trust Him with our prayers (Matt. 7:7, *Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you...*)
- Because He is holy, we can trust Him with our salvation (1 Cor. 1:9, *God, who has called you into fellowship with His son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*)

So, though we do not want to receive it ourselves, and it is not always pleasant to talk about, it's important because the wrath of God reveals God's holiness.

2. God's wrath conveys His justice.

Vs. 18: "... *against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...*"

God's wrath is not random. It's directed specifically directed at sin. Therefore, wrath is the agent for God's justice.

Now, God is a just God. Because He is holy, He is just. And this is a wonderful truth. Just ask anyone who has been on the receiving end of injustice. If you've ever been a victim, you can appreciate that there is a holy God who will hold all wrongdoing accountable. Sin brings accountability.

So, **what is sin** (as if we didn't know)?

- **Sin is irreverence to God** (godlessness = a lack of acknowledgement of God in thought or deed / living with no fear or respect of God; 1:21).
- **Sin is rebellion against God** (wickedness = a lack of restraint; life with no moral standard; 1:24).
- **Sin is suppression of God's truth** (suppression = to hold down; notice that people know what they need to know; sin is not an accident, nor an act of ignorance; it is willful disregard of God, adoption of your own standard, and suppressing what we know so that we don't have to hear the truth, nor will others hear it).

Now because of these things, God's wrath is being revealed. This isn't a threat of future action. It is something that was happening from the moment humanity fell into sin and is happening now, and will happen until the Lord's return. God is just, and sin therefore has consequences.

Now, this is wonderful, especially when you consider all the really bad sinners in the world, right? But look at Romans 2:1 – "*You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.*" Paul here, like a prosecutor, makes the case against all of us. We all deserve the wrath of God. What's so wonderful about that? Well, that comes in point #3.

3. God's wrath elevates His grace.

Remember, all of this flows out of Paul's reference to the gospel, the good news. Paul stressed the wrath of God in order to promote conviction (2 Cor. 7:10, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret). Paul wants us to know what we deserve from God.

But all of this is in the context of what God wants to give us: grace. And, back to verse 17, the gospel of grace shows us a righteousness from God that is revealed." And so we have two choices before us: our righteousness, which

at its best brings wrath, or God's righteousness, which can be applied to us by faith.

See, Paul's emphasis on wrath helps us to see our need. And the more we see our need, the more we cry out for the savior (Luke 7:47, "Her sins have been forgiven, for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.") The more clearly we understand God's wrath, the more clearly we see grace. We realize that it is the only way by which we will know God.

Conclusion:

God's wrath can be terrible. There will be an accounting for sin. The wages of sin are still death. But it's also wonderful, for God's wrath reveals His holiness, it conveys His justice, and most of all it elevates His grace.

What does this mean for you, today?

- Perhaps you simply need to pause this morning and thank God for His grace, for saving you from wrath. Let this reality drive you even more deeply into His arms of love. Worship Him. Honor Him.
- Perhaps, though you know you are saved from this wrath, you see some of how sin is described here in your life. And while God will not give you up on account of it, when you think of His wrath and you see all He saved you from, maybe you realize that there is no place for irreverence and rebellion in your life. Maybe you need to rededicate your life to Him.
- Or perhaps this morning you realize that, right now, His wrath is the best you have to look forward to. As things stand now, you are separated from God. Well, things do not have to stay that way. This morning, you can turn away from wrath to receive His grace.