

Romans

The pagans need the Gospel

Study 2 | Romans 1:18-32

Summary

1:18 – Intro: God's wrath *revealed* and *deserved*

v.18a Revealed: for the presence of God's wrath in the world *now*

v.18b Deserved: for we know the truth but suppress it so we can live as we wish

1:19-25 – God's wrath deserved – “*without excuse*”

God discloses his glory

v.19 God's existence is plainly disclosed

v.20 God's nature (power and divinity) is revealed in the created order

Humanity rejects true worship and glory

v.21a Refusal to glorify or thank the Creator

v.21b Both true reasoning processes and unconfused emotions are lost

Humanity constructs a counterfeit worship and glory

vv.22-23 Counterfeit religions and ideologies all worship something created

v.24 Counterfeit worship leads to bondage and addiction (“gave them up”)

v.25a Counterfeit worship based on believing a particular set of lies

v.25b Sum: if we won't worship the Creator we will worship something created

1:26-32 – God's wrath revealed – “*received... the due penalty*”

v.26a The principle of God's wrath: he gives us up to our false worship

vv.26b-27 The effects of God's wrath on the desires

vv.28-32 The effects of God's wrath on the mind and will

1. (v.18) What does this verse tell us about the wrath of God?

- a) Its **existence**. A loving God is also a wrathful God. Some may question how this can be, or say, “I have trouble with this.” In this situation, a guiding question can be: “**If you deeply love a person or even a place (like a lake), does that preclude wrath?**” Here is a quote to use:

We tend to be taken aback by the thought that God could be angry. How can a deity who is perfect and loving ever be angry?... We take pride in our tolerance of the excesses of others. So what is God's problem?... But love detests what destroys the beloved. Real love stands against the deception, the lie, the sin that destroys. Nearly a century ago the theologian E.H.Gifford wrote: ‘Human love here offers a true analogy: the more a father loves his son, the more he hates in him the

drunkard, the liar, the traitor.'... Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference... How can a good God forgive bad people without compromising himself? Does he just play fast and loose with the facts? 'Oh, never mind...boys will be boys'. Try telling that to a survivor of the Cambodian 'killing fields' or to someone who lost an entire family in the Holocaust. No. To be truly good one has to be outraged by evil and implacably hostile to injustice.

– Rebecca Pippert, *Hope Has its Reasons*

- b) Its **presence**. It is here working *now* (the present tense "*is revealed*"). There will be much more about *how* it is working today later in the passage.
- c) Its **object**. It is versus "godlessness" (a word which refers to disregard of God's rights) and "wickedness" (which, strictly speaking, is a word which refers to disregard of human rights to love, truth, justice, etc.).
- d) Its **deservedness**. It is versus people who know better, who "suppress the truth." (See the next question.). This important idea of "suppressing the truth" shows that every person "down deep" knows there is a God to whom they owe allegiance. Verse.21 goes so far as to say all human beings, even the pagans "knew God." (This doesn't mean that they had a personal covenant relationship with him, but that their knowledge of God's existence is very real, but repressed.)
- e) It's **the reason we need the gospel**. The NIV translation leaves out the word "for" which (in the Greek) starts the verse. The word connects v.18 with vv.16-17 and shows us that the gospel is necessary not simply to make us happy but because there is such a thing as the wrath of God. All of Paul's confidence and joy and passion for the gospel (1:1-17) rests upon the assumption that all human beings are, apart from the gospel, under the wrath of God. If you don't understand or believe in the wrath of God, the gospel will not thrill, empower, or move you.

Note: Don't let this discussion go on too long. Actually, the main subject of this whole passage is "the wrath of God." But there are other major themes that Paul lays out which must be understood before we can realize either the justice OR the operation of God's wrath in the world today. We return in the final question to ask what we've learned about God's wrath.

2. (vv.18-21) Why does Paul say that all human beings are "without excuse" if they don't seek or serve God?

It is because God has provided in nature numerous clear clues and evidences to his existence and nature. "What may be known about God is plain to them" (v.19) "being understood from what has been made" (v.20).

Don't let them give you just a general answer here. A guiding question: **"What are some of these clear evidences Paul is referring to and how do they make us without excuse?"** This is of course a very big and deep subject! There are many interesting ways to "see the existence of God" in the world around us.

But here is one way to think of it: All science proceeds on the assumption that inorganic life cannot produce organic life. Yet, if there is no personal creator, then life must have happened “by chance.” One scientist (not a Christian) said that organic life happening by accident is “as ridiculous and improbable as the proposition that a tornado blowing through a junkyard would assemble a Boeing 747” (Sir Fred Hoyle, *The Intelligent Universe*). He calculated that the chances of organic life happening are one in ten to the power of 40,000. (For organic life to spring from inorganic, 2,000 enzyme molecules would have to have formed simultaneously from 20 component amino acids on a single occasion.

Now many have argued that Hoyle’s numbers are too high. But all agree that it’s only a chance of “1 in a million” that life originated by accident, without a personal creator. Yet many or most scientists or intellectuals base all their thinking (and their eternal destiny) on this slim chance. Now think. Do rational people operate this way? Would you take all your earthly goods and possessions and bet them on a horse with 1 in 1,000 chance? Would you even bet \$1,000? But why would you do something in thinking about God that you wouldn’t do with \$1,000?

This is exactly what Paul referred to when he says, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God... but their thinking became futile.” To “suppress the truth,” they will engage in non sequiturs and non-rational “leaps.”

Here also is a fascinating quote that explicates Paul’s argument:

“Imagine a person who comes in here tonight and argues ‘no air exists’ but continues to breathe air while he argues. Now intellectually, atheists continue to breathe — they continue to use reason and draw scientific conclusions [which assumes an orderly universe], to make moral judgments [which assumes absolute values] — but the atheistic view of things would in theory make such ‘breathing’ impossible. They are breathing God’s air all the time they are arguing against him.”

– Greg Bahnsen, *Does God Exist: A Debate*

3. (v.20) What is made plain to us about God (and what is not)?

The text (v.20) tells us that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are revealed by nature and thinking about the world. This means that looking at the world should show you: that God exists and should be worshipped (“divine nature”) and that there must be a personal creator who brought all this about; and that God is great and worthy of respect (“eternal power”) and that whoever created all this must be a being of unimaginable greatness. Notice that we cannot deduce the love and mercy of God from looking at the world! Paul does not say that reasoning and investigation of the world will show us the way of salvation. That can only come through special revelation (Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets — i.e. the Bible).

4. (vv.22-25) What does Paul tell us always happens to human beings who reject worship of the true God?

a) Counterfeit god construction. Paul uses two words: we *worship* and *serve* created things. It means we were created to worship the Creator, so if we reject him we will worship *something* and that which we worship we will serve or have to “*obey*.” Human beings are goal-oriented. To live in the world, we have to order our lives into priorities and something must have the *highest* priority, that which gives us meaning. Now whatever that is, we “*serve*.” It becomes the “bottom line,” that which defines and validates all other things we do.

Because God created the world, all created things have some glory in them, of course, so it is possible to find these things admirable. The problem comes from giving any created thing *inordinate* affection — affection that is ultimate, like that which we owe God.

b) Bondage and addiction. Paul says “therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts.” This means that the things we serve will not free us. Rather, they control us. We are “given over to them.” We *have* to have them in order to be happy, to like ourselves, to have meaning in life. And since they do not satisfy (because our hearts were made to center on God, not on any created thing), we always need more and more.

Another great quote:

“Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by acceptance. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives.”

– Rebecca Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker*

5. Application: What are some examples of idols? or, How are all problems, personally, politically and socially the result of “worshipping the creature rather than the creator?”

A way to tell what your “idols,” your “functional masters,” are is to ask, “What is my greatest horror? What, if I lose it, would deprive me of a desire to even live? What do I need in order to accept myself?” That is your lord.

Some examples of personal idols:

A. Workaholism. Work becomes the thing you live for — to be productive and useful.

B. Codependent “enabling.” Needing to feel needed is what you live for.

C. Beauty and image. This can have various forms, including eating disorders.

D. Sex and physical gratification. (Paul mentions these in vv.26-27).

E. Romance. This is not the same as pure sexual gratification. You live for crushes or for someone to love you.

F. Perfectionism in general. You live to keep complete control of your life.

G. Materialism. Money and possessions become the salvation and driving force of your life.

Some examples of social/cultural idols:

a) Fascism. Make an idol of one's race or nationality. "I am acceptable because I am an _____" rather than getting identity as a child of God.

b) Communism. Make an idol of the state. Government, not God will solve all problems. Marx said everything is political, and all problems are political/economic ones, rather than spiritual ones.

c) Populism. Making an idol out of public opinion or majority rule, rather than what God says is right.

d) Capitalism. Making an idol out of the market. Like communism, seeing all our problems as economic ones.

e) Rigid multi-culturalism. One's ethnic group or culture is sovereign. No one can criticize it — it is absolute, rather than the Word of God.

f) Enlightenment humanism. Makes an idol of reason and scientific investigation. Science has an answer for everything and reason will open all doors.

Sum: At the root of all problems (personal or social), all non-Christian philosophies and ideologies, is the elevation of some created thing to the place of ultimate worship and ultimate arbiter of truth and meaning.

6. (vv.26-32) What are all the consequences of false worship Paul lists (spiritual, mental, moral, physical)?

These are mainly found in verses 26-32, but some are mentioned earlier in the passage.

Paul is showing us that the effect of this false worship leads to the complete disintegration of human life.

A. Intellectual confusion and frustration — (v.21), "futile reasoning," because to deny the supremacy of the true God requires holding to many non sequiturs and the suppression of truth. See also v.24, "exchanged the truth of God for a lie."

B. Emotional confusion and frustration (v.21), "darkened hearts," because the heart and desires were originally built for God and nothing put on the throne of the heart will satisfy.

C. Bondages and addictions (vv.24, 26 and 28) "gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts" because any false god becomes a tyrant which can never be satisfied.

D. Decay of personal and corporate life (vv.29-31) because behavior deteriorates. It leads to:

1. Economic disorder – “greed,”
2. Social disorder – “murder, strife, deceit, malice,”
3. Family breakdown – “they disobey their parents,”
4. Relational breakdown – “gossips, slanderers, insolent, arrogant and boastful,”
5. Character breakdown – “senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

Note: It is quite possible that the group will want to talk about vv.26-27 which sees homosexuality as a sexual bondage that flows out of idolatry. You should know:

1. This is the longest passage in the Bible on homosexuality.
2. This calls homosexuality “against nature” (*para phusin*). This means it is a violation of the nature God gave us.
3. This says homosexuality comes from worshipping the creature rather than the creator. Now we have seen that *every* problem comes from idolatry of some kind — so homosexuality isn’t the only one! But Paul may be saying that homosexuality comes from the idolizing of same-sex love.

7. vv.18-32 Review question: In light of all you have studied, what have you learned about a) how God’s wrath works right now and b) why God’s wrath is fair and just.

God’s wrath *is* revealed now and is the cause of the disintegration we see (v.18). But the justice and operation of his wrath can only be understood by looking at the self-destructive power of evil. Darkened hearts and minds are the direct results of a refusal of the truth (note the connection of vv.21a and 21b). The bondage they experience emotionally is the result of worshipping false gods that cannot satisfy (note the connection of vv.23 and 24). In other words, sin is violating the order God created (e.g. God created us to serve Him; God created us to live unselfish lives; God created us to tell the truth). So when we sin it sets up stresses and strains in the fabric of life that will lead to breakdowns — spiritually, psychologically, socially, physically.

Therefore, God’s wrath and punishment is to simply “give us over” (vv.24a, 26a, 28b) to the things we worship and the things we want. We see both the justice yet terror of God’s wrath. It is just, because “down deep” we know that there is a God (v.20 “without excuse”) and he is only giving us what we want (v.27 “received in themselves the due penalty”). It is terrible, because it means that the worst thing God can do to a human being is to let them reach their idolatrous goals.

Sum: Paul shows us how the world —

A. Rejects the true God. (vv.18-20: It has refused to acknowledge the reality of a Creator God, to whom all worship and service is due, though God has provided in nature numerous clear clues and evidences to his existence and nature.

B. Constructs counterfeit gods. (vv.21-25) Instead, human beings (who need to worship and serve something to have meaning in life), find created objects to worship instead, and construct lives, ideologies, and false philosophies and religions around those deified-created things.

C. Resulting in disintegration of human life. (vv.26-32) There is intellectual, emotional, personal, and social disintegration.

D. And all this is the revelation of God's wrath.