ROMANS: WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOD DOING?

PART 2: DEATH ROW (1:18-23)

REVIEW

Last week we looked at how Paul wrote this letter to the Romans from Greece while waiting out the winter weather on his way to Jerusalem to end his third missionary journey. The Roman church had undergone its share of turmoil over the last 6 or 7 years as the Jews were exiled from the city and the congregations became entirely Gentile. The all-gentile Church of Rome dressed differently, talked differently, taught differently, and worshiped differently. But the Jewish banishment ended and Jewish believers returned to an entirely different church culture where they were now in the minority.

Paul could have side-stepped these cultural and doctrinal issues and mobilized the Roman congregations into an army for social and political change in the corrupt city of Rome. That would have been the popular and lucrative thing to do for a man trying to raise money to fund a mission trip to Spain. Or he could have scolded them all and given them a long list of rules for how to get along – a not very lucrative but quite practical solution. Either of those choices would have meant writing a letter ABOUT the Romans.

Instead, Paul chose to write them a treatise on the doctrine of God’s plan for the world through Messiah Jesus. He writes a letter about the gospel to people who already trust the Good News. He says he longs to come and personally preach that same Good News to them for both his and their benefit. The differences between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers become petty and foolish squabbles in the light of Paul’s message of Law and Gospel.

There are grander things at work in the universe than how the Gentile elder dresses, how the Jewish believer eats, whether to observe holy days, or whether someone likes or hates the Jewish or Gentile music. God is doing something AMAZING and it doesn’t center on YOU or ME or the Romans. It’s about Messiah Jesus.

***16For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous has life by trust.”***[*The one who by trust is righteous shall live*.]

***18For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.***

Imagine a young reporter interviewing for a job with a local newspaper. She had very good credentials and a nice collection of well-written articles. The editor offers her a job. She agrees to take the job on one condition: “*I* *only* *want to report happy news*,” she tells him. “*I simply can’t stand writing about death, crime, or political corruption. It’s just too depressing.*”

What do you think happens to her job offer at that point? The editor thanks her for coming in and tells her his newspaper cannot use her services. He needs someone who can report ALL the news, not just the happy news. It’s the duty of a reporter to inform the public of both good news and bad.

Consider the medical school graduate applying for his residency. “*I have only one condition for accepting this residency: I am perfectly content to give patients the good news that they are well; but I refuse to deliver to anyone the bad news that they are sick and in need of treatment. It’s just too depressing for me. I can’t handle it.*” His chances for a prestigious residency, any residency, would dramatically decrease.

If that is true in the city of man, how much truer is it in the City of God?

Paul must begin with a very bleak diagnosis before he can begin to announce the miracle cure. The bad news is very, very bad. It’s worse than most of us want to consider most of the time. The wrath of God is not happy news for the person to whom the Spirit is pleased to reveal the depths of their sins. It’s not pleasant. But it IS part of what Paul called ***the whole counsel of God*** when he parted from the Ephesian elders, “***…I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God*** (Acts 20:27).

Without the context of God’s Law, there really can’t be any Good News. We must recognize our desperate need of something to be truly excited about receiving it. So Paul turns from the revelation of God’s righteousness (17) to man’s fundamental need for righteousness in light of God’s wrath. He shows us three things about the wrath of God: (1) **revelation** of God’s wrath; (2) the **reasons** for God’s wrath; and (3) the **results** of God’s wrath.

1. **REVELATION OF WRATH (1:18)**
   1. **Patients’ History**
      1. With the theme of his letter announced in 1:16-17, Paul is now ready to begin his exposition of the Good News as God’s power for salvation. He will undertake three major themes: **justification** (1:18 – 5:11); **sanctification** (5:12 – 8:17); and **glorification** (8:18-39). It is a march “from the dung heap to the glory heap,” as my childhood Sunday school teacher called it.
      2. Paul begins on the dung heap because he must first tell us what we are saved FROM. His answer, which runs through 3:20, is that those receiving the free gift of Christ’s righteousness by means of trust are **saved from the wrath of God**.
      3. To arrive at a cure, one must first have the patient’s history, then a diagnosis can be formed and a cure offered. Romans 1:18 through 3:20 is the case history and diagnosis of the human condition.
      4. Paul will move from the history of all mankind (1:18-32)[[1]](#footnote-1) to the case history of the Jews (2:1 – 3:8) to the diagnosis that the entire world is left speechless, without legal defense, before God (3:9-20). Dr. Law must diagnose before Dr. Grace can cure.
   2. **Congenital Defect**
      1. The very word ***wrath*** is off-putting to people. We associate “wrath” with human reactions like vindictive rage, emotional reactions to someone having violated our “kingdom of me.” *How dare you do something or say something of which I don’t approve? You have incurred my wrath!*
      2. But the ***wrath of God*** is not bound up with human self-concern. **God’s wrath is the antagonism of holy love to evil.**[[2]](#footnote-2) It is reaction of the Creator’s perfection who has sworn by Himself to war with evil to the last drop of his blood.[[3]](#footnote-3)
      3. No human can have the Holy Creator’s love unless that person has first had God’s wrath fully poured out, in all its terror and consuming fire, upon their ungodliness and unrighteousness. Before adoption, God is NOT our loving father but our utterly perfect Creator Judge, jury, and executioner.
      4. The **object** of God’s wrath is ***ungodliness and unrighteousness*** of humans. These two words express the basic truth that immorality is the fault of human doctrine. ***Ungodliness*** describes what humans trust; ***unrighteousness*** describes how we act upon what we trust.
      5. ***Ungodliness*** relates to the first table of God’s law. “***I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3“You shall have no other gods before me***” (Ex. 20:2-3).
      6. Paul will tell us that fundamental law of honoring God as God was written in men’s hearts from the time of creation. Before Adam took forbidden fruit and ate it, he had to abandon his trust in God. Adam’s action was the result of Adam’s rejection of God’s revelation. His heart held ***ungodliness*** before his hands practiced ***unrighteousness***.
      7. Adam suppressed God’s truth; that is, Adam failed to trust God’s revelation and chose to trust his own judgment instead. All sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, from that moment on, inherited self-trust from which flow self-serving actions.
2. **REASONS FOR WRATH (1:19-20)**
   1. **Natural Revelation**
      1. In verses 19-20, we have the divine reason of man’s wickedness. Paul begins with the word, “***For…***” or “***Because...”***
      2. ***19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them***. Humans have willfully rejected God’s ***plain*** self-revelation. How? “***20For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse***.”
      3. All humans know God and his righteousness both as an innate idea (something men are born knowing, reflected by their conscience), and as personified in nature. Paul will tell us in verse 32 that all men ***know God’s righteous decree that those who practice*** rebellion ***deserve to die*** (God’s law written on the conscience).
      4. God’s revelation in creation is certainly limited. “There is no revelation of his mercy, holiness, grace, love, or the many other things necessary for us to learn if we are to know God savingly. Still, we are not to think of this limited revelation as minimal, as if somehow its limited quality alone can excuse us. According to the Bible, this natural revelation of God, though limited, is nevertheless extensive and overwhelming in its force.”[[4]](#footnote-4)
      5. David sang about natural revelation in Psalm 19. “***The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. 2Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. 3There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. 4Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world***” (Ps. 19:1-4).
   2. **Imago Dei**
      1. Notice David sings, “***3There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. 4Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world***”?
      2. Human speech/language is part of natural revelation**. God’s image in man is man’s capacity for rational thought, speech, and moral agency**.
      3. God also declares himself in the minute details of creation that man’s rational though ought to comprehend. Recall how God questions Job at length on Job’s knowledge of creation in Job 38-39,
      4. “***Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, 7when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?***” (Job 38:4-7).
      5. God tells Job that man’s rational thought and innate ideas are part of God’s testimony in creation: “***Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind?***” (Job 38:36).
      6. In 39:17 God speaks of the apparent stupidity of the ostrich and says, “***God has made her forget wisdom and given her no share in understanding.***” Only human creatures are stamped with the innate knowledge of God and the capacity for rational and moral thought.
      7. Nature shows God’s wrath in death. Everything dies. We know from Genesis 3 and our study of Ecclesiastes that death, decay, and suffering are directly due to God’s wrath.
      8. But remember, Paul preached to the people of Lystra that creation also reflects God’s kindness. “***God … made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy***” (Acts 14:15b–17).
      9. The problem is NOT that the signs of God are not in creation. The signs are plain and obvious. The problem is NOT with God, but with men who refuse to acknowledge God and instead begin to see nature itself as the life-giver – Mother Nature, Gaia, , The Force, The Universe – all of which testifies to that fact that **EVERYONE IS A PERSON OF FAITH** .
      10. Because man has become a slave to sin through the ***ungodliness*** and ***unrighteousness***and our earthly father Adam, man refuses to read God’s signs. His mind is blinded; his will is corrupted and enslaved; his heart is hardened, spiritually dead to things of the One True God (but not to “spirituality” in general). Man actively suppresses his capacity for rational thought concerning God.
      11. Calvin wrote, “But although we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God, all excuse is cut off because the fault of dullness is within us. And, indeed, we are not allowed thus to pretend ignorance without our conscience itself always convicting us of both baseness and ingratitude.”[[5]](#footnote-5)
3. **RESULTS OF WRATH (1:21-23)**
   1. **Patient History (21)**
      1. Paul’s words in vv. 21-23 are the beginning of mankind’s religious history. “It is the story of the regression of man from an original knowledge of God to ignorance and darkness.”[[6]](#footnote-6) We know this because of his use of past tense verbs.
      2. He writes, “***For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*** (1:21-23).
      3. Two things are apparent: first, this is a story of DE-evolution, not evolution (it’s a history from knowledge to willful ignorance); second, it is not the story of man’s ascent to mature religious knowledge, but of man’s descent into idolatry.
      4. **Men and women reject God because they do not like him**. See verse 18: ***godlessness***. They reject his sovereignty in order to build their own “kingdom of me” just like the devil, just like Adam, just like you and I are naturally hard-wired to do every day even though you may be right with God in Christ Jesus.
      5. “Nothing could have been more irrational than for Adam to eat of that tree. God had never lied to him, so he could believe God. Moreover, Adam owed God utter and unquestioning obedience in this and every other matter. …There was nothing to be gained from eating! There was everything to lose! Still, as Adam looked at the tree it was a great offense to him. The tree stood for a limitation on his personal desires. …So Adam said in effect, ‘That tree is an offense to my autonomy. I do not care if I can eat of all the trees north of here, east of here, south of here, and west of here. As long as I allow that tree to remain untouched, I feel less than human. I feel diminished. Therefore, I am going to eat of it and die, whatever that may mean.’”[[7]](#footnote-7)
   2. **Foolish Wisdom (22-23)**
      1. At that moment, Adam and all of we children that follow, began to **hate God for his holiness** as well as his sovereignty. As we’ll see next week, humans KNOW they are sinning but want approval for their sin. People who share your sins become your buddies; people who have different sins become your enemies.
      2. Why? Because Adam hard-wired us to sear our consciousness against our own sin. But our conscious STILL accuses. So we look for the specks in others’ eyes in order to ignore the planks in our own.
      3. Man wants to be wise. We have an innate need for righteousness. They only way to acquire such righteousness apart from God is to invent our own criteria for wisdom.
      4. **Wisdom for fallen humans devolved into the ability to identify our felt needs and meet those wants in the most economical way**. *I need to find what makes me happy; and I will only be happy if \_\_\_\_\_\_\_* [fill in your idol of the moment].
      5. The fruit of depravity is idolatry. So to create feelings of happiness, humans turn to things: the corruptible rather than incorruptible; the temporal rather than the eternal; the earthly and fleshly beings rather than the heavenly and spiritual Being.

With this 23rd verse, the case against human ***ungodliness*** is complete. Paul will spend the remainder of Romans 1 demonstrating man’s ***unrighteousness***.

Paul has told us the revelation of God in nature is fully adequate to condemn people who refuse to worship and serve this true God. But man has chosen to darken his heart to God and to man’s own sin. This is not the kind of happy news our idealistic young newspaper reporter would like to report. This is worse than the news our sensitive physician-in-training would ever have to deliver.

Back before modern courthouses built separate hallways for prisoner transport, deputies would walk the capital murder convicts through the public hallways, shouting a warning of danger: “**Dead man walking!**” That warning was to let everyone know the prisoner was bound for death row. The prisoner had nothing to lose; he was already reckoned dead and so, very dangerous – capable of anything.

Dr. Law says that we are already dead. We are, by nature, on death row – dead people walking. O, but Dr. Grace has wonderful news of a miracle cure! It’s a miracle cure because it is utterly outside of man’s power. It is, ***the power of God for salvation to everyone who trusts*** (1:16) it for life. By trust, they can become righteous. By trust they can be adopted as sons and daughters of the living God rather than remain objects of his holy wrath!

The first Adam rebelled and earned God’s wrath for all humanity. Jesus, the Last Adam, lived in perfect, humble submission to all God’s righteous requirements so that his righteousness could be imputed (reckoned) to those who trust in Christ. The Last Adam suffered the infinite and terrible wrath of God against sin, exhausting that wrath for all who will but trust in Jesus’ shed blood upon Calvary’s cross and be adopted by a now-loving Father.

Do not be wise in your own eyes. Take the medicine of Dr. Grace and live! Trust this Good News, this prescription, this verdict from the Judge:

***…because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord”*** (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

[Supper: Message of Romans is one of reconciliation between rule-keepers and “grace” lovers through the Gospel.]

1. Many scholars see 1:18-32 as an address to Gentiles only. See Johnson, 3:2; Moo, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. G.C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, (Grand Rapids, 1971), 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Johnson, 3:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Justification by Faith*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991–), 140. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 68, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Johnson, 3:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Justification by Faith*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991–), 147–148. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)