

Righteousness or Wrath

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Romans 1:16–32 (NKJV) *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’ ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ²¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. ²⁷ Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. ²⁸ And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; ²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, ³⁰ backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, ³¹ undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; ³² who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.”*

This passage, although lengthy, is critical to our understanding of the nature of God’s salvation and His wrath. The Bible is our handbook on the worship of the true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God has revealed Himself to mankind through creation, through His Word, and through His Son Jesus Christ. Our response toward His self-revelation determines God’s response toward us. In reality, every person is living right now either under God’s righteousness or His wrath. Which one are you living under?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that God has revealed both his righteousness and His wrath. How has He done this? In Romans 1:16-17 we see that the righteousness of God (Literally, “righteousness from God”) is revealed through the Gospel. The Gospel is the power of God to salvation toward everyone who believes. Those who believe in the Gospel will receive the gift of righteousness that comes from God only by faith. (Romans 3:21-22; 5:17) This gift of righteousness is not earned but is imputed to the believer on the basis of God’s grace. (2 Corinthians 5:21) Anyone who believes and obeys the Gospel is now under His salvation rather than His wrath.

Those who are saved are saved from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:10) And yet, the wrath of God abides even now upon those who do not believe. (John 3:36) How is God revealing His wrath? In Romans 1:18-32 Paul states that God reveals His wrath against *“all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”* The wrath of God rests upon everyone who is unsaved because of their sin and rebellion against Him.

How are people rebellious against God? They “suppress” the truth of God to justify their unrighteous ways. Paul makes it clear that God has given everyone sufficient revelation of Himself so that they might know Him. What may be known of God is manifest in (among) them—because God has shown it to them.

How has God revealed Himself? First, God has revealed Himself through His creation. God designed creation as His classroom to bear witness to His reality and nature. Although God has enabled men to know Him, they willingly suppress His reality as Creator and imagine that the earth and the universe are the result of evolution or some other god. Why do men suppress the truth of the Creator? Paul gives several reasons. First, they refuse to glorify Him as God. They reject His sovereignty over their lives. They reject His holy and righteous nature. They reject any accountability to Him and seek to cast off His restraints. Second, they are unthankful. They have an angry and distorted sense of entitlement believing that God owes them something. They forget that they are debtors to God and have not received what they really deserve. Third, they are futile in their thoughts. By rejecting the knowledge of God, their reasoning has become hostile and irrational in light of the evidence God has presented.

Those who insist on suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness bring upon themselves the error of their ways. First, their foolish heart is darkened while believing they are enlightened. Second, they become fools while thinking they are wise. Third, they conjure up false forms of worship to replace the true worship of God. They attempt to create God in their image and likeness. They change the glory of the incorruptible God into the image of corruptible men and creatures. This descent into deception is evidence of the wrath of God resting upon an individual.

Paul then describes three progressive stages of God’s wrath. First, God gives these rebels up to uncleanness—sexual promiscuity. By dishonoring God as Creator, they dishonor His purpose for the sexual union in marriage by giving themselves to sexual immorality. Second, because they refuse to repent of their sexual immorality, God gives them over to vile passions—sexual perversity such as homosexuality and bestiality. These kinds of sexual sins openly defy the Creator’s design of male and female. Third, because they no longer acknowledge God in their lives, God gives them over to a debased (reprobate) mind. A reprobate mind regards wickedness as the new normal. Right is now wrong and wrong is now right. A reprobate mind is so given over to sin that it is callous to the conviction of the Holy Spirit that calls them back to God. While they are aware of the righteous judgment of God, they have no fear. They not only practice every form of evil, but they openly embrace and encourage those who do the same.

There is a wrath to come on the final day of God’s judgment. However, God’s wrath already rests upon those who refuse to repent and believe the Gospel. The good news is that we can be saved from God’s wrath. Man’s only hope to escape God’s wrath is to receive His gift of righteousness by faith. Don’t presume upon God’s grace and longsuffering. The longer we wait, the more God’s wrath is stored up against us and the more we are given over to the deception of our sin. God has revealed both His righteousness and His wrath. Will we choose God’s gift of righteousness by faith or remain under the wrath of God through unbelief?

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