

Righteousness or Wrath — Which Will It Be?

A Study on Romans 1:17-18

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Many times I have spoken to people about their need of Jesus Christ to save them from the wrath to come, and they have replied, “Surely God wouldn’t send anyone to eternal punishment. He is a God of love!” Such a statement shows a complete misunderstanding of the biblical concept of God. It is true that God is love, but he is far more than love; he is also absolutely holy and just: “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Hab. 1:13). God has love towards sinners in that he makes provision for men to receive forgiveness (John 3:16), but God also hates sin. As God, he must judge sin and sinners to satisfy his own perfect justice and holiness.

The wrath of God is not an easy subject, but a minister is to proclaim the whole counsel of God. The Bible teaches that God’s wrath burns hot against sin and sinners. Unless a person receives God’s remedy for sin in Christ, there is no hope for him and his destiny becomes the lake of fire.

There are three basic attitudes towards God’s wrath: 1) Some deny the Bible completely, thinking it was written by men and not to be taken seriously. Thus, “hell” is nothing more than a fairy tale. These rank rejecters are few and far between, but they are consistent with their convictions. 2) Others believe in God and accept many of the moral and ethical teachings of the Bible, but deny that the Bible teaches eternal punishment after this life. They say that “all the hell that men will ever experience is here on earth.” These are deluded and misguided people who cannot see the impossibility of accepting the ethical teachings of Jesus while denying his teachings of sin and hell. They are not only illogical and deceived, they are also intellectually dishonest. 3) Some believe the whole Bible, including the concept of a literal hell and eternal punishment for all people who do not receive God’s solution to sin in Christ’s atoning death. This is what the Bible teaches, whether or not man wants to accept it.

Paul contrasts a righteousness which is revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:17) and God’s wrath which is revealed from heaven (Rom. 1:18).

A RIGHTEOUSNESS FROM GOD (Romans 1:17)

Paul tells us that there is a righteousness that God gives to man whenever he receives Jesus Christ as personal Savior. This righteousness is in the gospel. What is the gospel? Christ died for man’s sin and rose again from the dead to declare men righteous. This is a

fact of history, and becomes a spiritual reality when one places his faith in Jesus Christ. The last part of Romans 1:17 says, “The just shall live by faith.”

The first part of Romans 1:17 states the theme of the Book of Romans: righteousness.¹

In Romans 1:18–3:20 Paul shows men why they need this righteousness from God. He begins by stating that all men are under God’s wrath (1:18), and concludes by declaring all under sin and separated from God (3:9-12). This is a horrible, tragic picture of the true condition of man. It is not hard to understand that God’s wrath comes down upon men because all men are sinners and separated from God!

In Romans 1:18–3:20 Paul divides all humanity in terms of Jew and Gentile. He shows in 1:18-32 that all Gentiles, who had no specific or special revelation from God, are guilty sinners and stand in line for God’s judgment. In 2:1–3:8 he shows that the Jews, who were moral and religious, and who had much revelation from God, were sinners in line for God’s wrathful judgment just as the Gentiles.

Man must see his sinfulness before he seeks the Savior. He must see his sickness before he seeks a remedy. He must see his ruin before he longs for God’s righteousness, and he must see that he is lost before he will flee to the Son of God to be found.

WRATH FROM GOD (Romans 1:18)

In Romans 1:18-32 Paul categorizes all Gentiles of every time and place. The wrath of God burns hot against all Gentiles whether they have ever heard the gospel or not. Gentiles are lost because they are sinners separated from God, and by nature in active rebellion against God. Paul’s point is that all Gentiles have a concept of a supreme being, and at one time in history had a clear concept of the one true God. Because of sin they have reacted to the truth of monotheism and rejected whatever truth they once knew about God.

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.” The Greek word for “wrath” is *orge*, which means “an indignation that has risen gradually and become more settled.” This shows God’s “slow boil” towards man’s continual and progressive rebellion to him. It indicates that God is longsuffering, but that he will eventually bring judgment. This wrath “is being revealed.” It is a continual and never-ending process. God never tolerates sin, neither in time

¹ For an outline of Romans refer to lesson 1 of this series.

nor eternity! There are many today who play “loose and free” with God. They think that because they are getting away with sin now God will not judge them in eternity.

There was once an unbelieving farmer who wanted to show a group of Christian farmers in a community in the west that he could have bigger and better crops than the Christians if he labored on Sundays. He had forty acres of land right across from the local church. This man would work all day Sunday while the Christians were in church worshiping the Lord. Through the spring, summer, and fall, he plowed, disked, harrowed, dragged, fertilized, drilled and cultivated the field, and finally cut, stacked, and husked the corn and carried it to the crib. Then he wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper pointing out that he had done all this on Sundays and yet had the highest yield per acre of any farm in the area. He asked the editor how the Christians could explain this. The editor printed the letter, but with great common sense followed it with the simple statement, “God does not settle His accounts in the month of October.” God settles His accounts in eternity!

“Against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” Ungodliness speaks of sin towards God, man’s utter failure to acknowledge and submit himself to God. It is his constant indifference and rebellion to God. Unrighteousness is sin towards man. If man is capable of terrible acts towards God, how much more will he do terrible things to men! Men are guilty of great inhumanities one to the other, from crimes of murder to the destruction of reputation. Man lives only for himself, not for God or for others. God’s wrath is against men because of their sin. A holy God must judge sin in order to be consistent with his own character. If he did not, he would not be God!

“Who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” In this context, “truth” refers to the concept of a supreme being. Gentiles everywhere have this concept of God, although it may take different forms such as a force or an image.

Paul’s point is that men have enough understanding of God to be condemned but not enough light to be saved.

“Who hold.” The thought here is that men have a concept of God but, instead of seeking more truth, they suppress the truth they do have. They have knowledge, but they do nothing with it. They hold the truth in unrighteousness — “men love darkness rather than light.” Thus, they rationalize and mock the truth of God, and attempt to substitute anything for God in their lives. Yet, they are only acting according to their natures.

Any psychologist can tell you that when truth is repressed, or smothered and refused recognition, it creates serious tension and complexes. Men become ridden with guilt; they become restless; they become dissatisfied and torn. This is why we see in life the

phenomenon of people all over the world being continually beset by the same problems, troubled with guilt complexes, such as a restless unsatisfied spirit. Man's reaction to this is to run even further from God, to crowd him out of life, even to reason him away if possible.

How can man have the truth of a supreme being and yet reject this truth? Man was created in the image of God, with will, intellect, and emotion. He has a will to choose, a mind to know, and emotions to love God. In the Garden of Eden man had as perfect or pure a concept of the true God as man can have. In Genesis 2:17, God put only one prohibition before Adam and Eve: they should not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This test was to show man's submission to and dependence on God. It was clearly stated that if man disobeyed God and ate the fruit, he would die both physically and spiritually. He would lose fellowship with God. Adam and Eve ate of the tree and at that moment died spiritually (lost fellowship with God) and began to die physically. They declared their independence of God, showing the failure of submission and a desire to please only themselves.

At this point the image of God in which man was created became marred with sin. Man's will, intellect, and emotions were corrupted. Sin became a basic part of the immaterial man. The image was not lost, but sin had taken its toll on man's personality. Man still retains God's image, but is corrupt because of sin.

“Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made he man” (Gen. 9:6).

“Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God” (Jas. 3:9).

God had to rescue or save Adam and Eve. He killed an animal and made coats of skin to cover them. This shedding of innocent blood pointed to Christ!

The Bible teaches that the sin nature, a basic part of man, has been passed on from our first parents, Adam and Eve, to the whole of the human race so that every person born into this world has a sin nature.

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5).

“Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Eph. 2:3).

This sin nature in all men makes itself known in acts of rebellion. By nature, a person wants to be independent of God and to live only for himself. His inherent desire is not to be in submission to and under the authority of God, and this desire according to his nature. You never have to teach a child to be bad. Why? Because his nature is corrupt, and he will act badly simply by acting according to his nature.

From Adam and Eve to Noah, men had a concept of the one, true God, but it was corrupted because of sin. The longer the race went on, the more the concept of God was perverted. Finally, men became so corrupt that God destroyed the world by a flood. Only Noah and his family were saved — the wrath of God fell on the rest of humanity. After the flood, Noah and his family began to repopulate the earth. At first they had a sound concept of the one, true God, but as time went on, man's sin caused him to move further and further from the true concept of God. Men became very corrupt, and were guilty of idolatry and other gross forms of worship. Today men have an inkling that there is a supreme being, but because of sin the concept of God as presented in the Bible has been lost. When men pervert the true concept of God, they are only acting according to their depraved, sinful natures. Whatever truth men have they reject or suppress because all are sinners by nature and choose to rebel and act independently of God. Thus God's wrath comes down on all men everywhere because they are sinners.

A few men have maintained the true concept of God — those who have been saved through Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

When some people read Romans 1:18, they say that they don't want this hard teaching of the Apostle Paul on God's wrath; they want the moral and ethical teachings of the "meek and lowly Jesus." This kind of thinking is fallacious, for Jesus Christ had more to say about God's wrath and about hell than all the other New Testament writers put together. He taught that there is a literal place called hell, and that it is characterized as a place of unquenchable fire, a place where the worm never dies, and a place where there is screaming and gnashing of teeth. Hell is a reality — that is what Jesus taught.

In their mockery of God, some people say, "If there is a literal hell, I won't mind going there because I'll be there with all my friends and we will have a good old time together." How arrogant and naive! Hell will be a place of misery and everlasting punishment. Man will have no happiness there for he will be separated from God's grace for eternity. God knows hell is real, and is so serious about it that he has sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for the sins of men so that they might not have to go there.

While Christ made an atonement at the cross for men to have their sins forgiven, the forgiveness he purchased by his atonement will not be applied to you until you trust Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Until you believe the gospel and trust Christ you are under the wrath of God:

“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36).

Righteousness from Christ or wrath from God, which will it be?