

The Majesty of God and Misery of Man

Romans 1:18-23

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Most pools have a shallow end and a deep end. For all the fanfare, you have maybe thought so far that the book of Romans seems fairly tame. Not shallow, but not deep either. Today, we step into the deep end. There is no gradual slope. It's a drop-off, but what a wonderful place to dive—the gospel. Realize God wants us to understand these things.

This section of Romans we are calling *The Gospel and our Misery* and it will take us through 3:20. Today's message is entitled, *The Majesty of God and the Misery of Man*.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For 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."
(Romans 1:18–20 ESV)

Little words are incredibly important in Romans. We have one here. Verse 16 begins with the word "for." This little word bridges the two verses that precede with what he takes up in verse 18. What preceded was his thesis statement about the gospel. By the power of God those who believe are made righteous before God. Paul says, *I am not ashamed of it*.

Perhaps you've come these past two weeks and left kind of shaking your head. *I don't get it. What's the big deal about this? Why are all these people so interested in "the gospel"?* The Apostle Paul immediately shows why this is so important. *"For the wrath of God..."*

"Wrath?" That's not a word we typically use, and unfortunately, not a word we often associate with God. We are much more comfortable celebrating the love of God. The mercy of God. The grace of God. The wrath of God seems out of sync with these other attributes of God.

But the bottom line is that while we may pick and choose the qualities of God we like, that doesn't change who God actually is. Please see that the most definitive explanation of the gospel ever (Romans) doesn't begin with God's love and grace, it begins with God's wrath. It starts with the bad news, so we can understand what makes the good news good.

What is God's Wrath?

We have to think about God's anger as fundamentally different from normal human anger. While there is such a thing as righteous indignation, we have never witnessed truly holy wrath. Human wrath is never fully holy wrath. At its best it still has selfishness mixed in. Most of our anger is purely selfish and sinful. God's is neither. God's wrath is defined as:

- *"Personal indignation toward human sinfulness."*¹ (Colin G. Kruse)
- *"It is his holy and righteous response to those who do not worship and esteem him as God."*² (Thomas R. Schreiner)

¹ Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, p. 90.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 89.)

- **"God's justice maintaining God's glory by defending God's holiness."** (Pastor Steve)

We see this in the rest of the verse. *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."* (Romans 1:18) God's justice and wrath against sin is a statement of his own infinite worth. Why else go to the trouble? Who cares if people violate his holiness with sin? No big deal! Little white lies and sins. No big deal, right?

An imperfect illustration of this is a society that has laws but the local sheriff and judge don't enforce them. The lack of care for justice is really a value statement on the worth of the law in the first place. But if the law or standard is deemed important or infinitely glorious, then justice is precise, exact, tireless, and passionate. Sin by Satan and the demons and Adam and Eve and the rest of us is all of us falling short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). If God's glory means nothing, then who cares? If God's glory means everything, then righteous anger against the unrighteousness is not only needed, but required. If God wasn't wrathful against sin he would in that moment cease to be God. For he would himself fall short of his own glory. Glory demands justice and justice defends holiness.

Unless you are a Universalist, there is no way to have a glorious God and no hell. God had to make hell. God has to punish sinners in hell. Hell is a statement that God's holiness matters. When you drive by prisons and jailhouses in a town, what do you think? *In this town, nobody cares about the law.* No. Prisons exist because the rule of law matters. Hell exists because God's holiness is infinitely worthy.

Further, we must also realize that God's wrath is against both sin and sinners. God doesn't send sins to hell, he sends sinners. Time doesn't allow me to explain how God can be both angry and loving toward sinners at the same time other than noting it as a daily experience of a parent. Perhaps that will suffice.

Paul isn't saying, *God's mad at what you've done, but don't worry; he loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.* No. God's plan for sinners who are not under his grace is hell forever. That doesn't seem wonderful to me.

God is angry with sinners AND their sin. We have to begin here to ever understand how Jesus' death could be propitiatory (a word we will get to later), which means, anger-satisfying. The sky became dark at noon as Jesus hung on the cross for a reason. What is it? Wrath. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mark 15:34) Why? The answer to that question is that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness.

The basic question of Romans is, *are you under God's wrath or under God's grace?* Which will it be for you forever? Life or death? Love or wrath? Heaven or hell?

Verse 18 ends with a curious little clause regarding sinful humanity, "who...suppress the truth." Exactly what truth are we suppressing? The truth about God seen in the world.

"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For 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." (Romans 1:19-20)

Paul immediately anticipates the protest to God's wrath. *Hey, how could we know we are guilty? How could we know he is angry?* God has made it plain by creating a universe with

trillions upon trillions of reflections of his character. Where he is going to end up, is to say men are without excuse. Keep that in mind as we explore this.

This is often called natural revelation. God has spoken in three general categories.

- *World* – Creation reveals his invisible qualities
- *Word* – The written revelation of his nature, will, and saving purposes
- *Son* – The exact representation of his being. (Hebrews 1:3)

How Does God Speak to us Through Creation?

God is spirit. He is not physical. God is not part of this creation. That is known as pantheism and is practiced by Buddhists and Hindus. No. As amazing as creation is, it is not God. God created the universe as a separate reality from him.

Creation is the visible reflection of God's invisible nature

- *"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard."* (Psalm 19:1-3)
- *"And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!'"* (Isaiah 6:3)

How? How do the heavens "speak"? How is the earth full of his glory?

Here is where we must see creation like a **mirror**. [Pastor Steve pulls out a mirror] I can look in this mirror and I can see you if I angle it right. You can see me. What am I actually seeing? I am seeing your reflection. That's the word we use. Is what I am seeing you? No. What I am seeing is what you are like without it being you. The mirror communicates a sufficient amount of what you are like for me to say, *I see you*.

The mirror has tremendous limitations. It is only two-dimensional. You are three-dimensional. The image is much smaller than you are. It has no capacity for volume or weight. The mirror is much lighter than you. It can't tell me anything about your internal organs, overall health, background, knowledge, loves, family history and on and on. There is so much it doesn't say, but it says a lot.

This universe is filled with billions of mirrors. They aren't God, but they do reflect God. They are not all that he is. He is so much more than we could ever get from creation. But we get a lot from creation about what God is like.

Here is where it gets a little sticky because it isn't clear how we exactly "perceive" these things. That's the world Paul uses. How do we discern God's nature? Paul highlights two aspects. *His power and divine nature*. At least these two. Perhaps these are the easy ones. How do we discern God's power by looking at creation? Have you ever watched a thunderstorm? Sat by a waterfall? Seen volcanoes erupt? Have you seen earthquakes or floods?

The scale of the universe is beyond even our modern technology knowing. The power within the creation still scares us. What happened when one atom was split over Hiroshima in 1945? The power in one atom is astounding. How many atoms are in the universe?

As many of you know, the beauty of creation and what it says to us is a favorite topic of mine. I have written one book in my life and it was on that subject. The title was, *Eyes Wide Open*. What do we see when we look into the world? Not just stuff, but astounding beauty.

If our eyes are wide open, what do we “perceive” from creation? There is a Creator. There is a God. He is powerful. He is beautiful to create such awesome beauty. God shouts through creation every day, *I’m here and this is what I am like!*

Still, how are we without excuse? We are going to hit this later in Romans, but part of creation is that God has given us a moral awareness. We call it a conscience. We are instinctively aware that we live in a moral universe. This is a mystery, but God has so wired us as image bearers that we are instinctively aware of a moral code to which we feel shame. That shame is universal among humans across all cultures and time. It creates that inward feeling that we are all aware of called “nakedness.” Adam and Eve connected that feeling of bodily shame to their first experience of sin. You are here with clothes on today because you are moral and whether you realize it or not, are living with a perception of moral accountability to your Creator. God is there. God is creative. God is powerful. God is moral. Yet, natural revelation has profound limitations.

Creation says enough to condemn us but not enough to save us

Like a mirror has limitations to communicate, creation does to. We become aware of God’s existence, his power, and our moral accountability. But I can stare at the stars all I want and I am not, on my own, going to conclude that God has a Son named Jesus who died on the cross and rose again on the third day. For me to get that, I need God’s Word about God’s Son and this will form the basis for Paul’s urgency about preaching the gospel. How else can we be saved? *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”* (Romans 10:17) *“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”* (Romans 10:15)

So, what about people who only see creation and never hear the gospel? I’d like to address this more later on in our series but hopefully this will suffice for now. God holds us accountable to the light we receive. Creation gives some light as we have seen. Nobody can say, *you didn’t tell me anything!* God says, *I was speaking every day.*

Apparently, God punishes in degrees based on the truth we have access to and our level of response to it. Jesus said it would be better if Judas had never been born than to spend eternity as the one who betrayed Jesus (Matthew 26:24). Jesus said in Matthew 10:15 that it would be better to have been a citizen of wicked Sodom than a citizen of a town that rejected one of his disciples’ ministry. These and other places indicate levels of punishment even in hell.

Here is the sobering news. What you have heard by being here today places you in the highest level of accountability forever. You have just today received far greater privilege and spiritual light than any remote tribesman. All he has is creation. Today, you have heard the gospel. You can follow this spiritual GPS right to the cross and be under God’s grace forever.

It is better to be an aborigine who never heard the gospel than to be you forever if you reject the gospel. It is better to be a remote tribesman in Ecuador than to be you forever IF you suppress the truth.

So what should you do if right now you can’t say, *I repent and I believe?* Yet there’s something in you that tells you, you are accountable for your life; you feel the weight of your responsibility to God and you suspect that heaven and hell are real.

Friend, ask this question, why did God make the whole universe reflect what he is like? Why did he give you a conscience? Why make the world astonishingly beautiful? There is only one conclusion—He wants you to know him! And...

God Wants to Save Us

In a few verses Paul writes, "*God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.*" (Romans 2:4) He doesn't fill the world with mirrors to condemn us but to save us.

It's like my girls when we play hide and seek. They are getting craftier now, but for a long time I would get done counting and say, "*Ready or not, here I come!*" And about two seconds later I'd hear, "*Daddy, I'm over here!*" They want to be found and they make noise so I can find them.

God is making massive noise so that you can find him. Do you dare pray, *God, I may have missed you up to this point in my life, but I don't want to miss out on you or your salvation. Help me.* How many have found God by just that simple initial humble prayer...*God, if you are there, won't you save me?* God is a saving God. He wants us to know him. He sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins to save us. Jesus said, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*" (John 3:17)

We move from magnificent mirrors to genuine faith and trust in Jesus dying for the sins of my life. Would you like to be included in that? God is speaking. Are you listening?

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