

GOD IS ANGRY: THE WRATH OF GOD IN ROMANS

Dr. Alexander Kurian

Paul's letter to the Romans is the most powerful presentation of the Christian Gospel in existence. But Romans is not a simple gospel tract written to show the A, B, C's of salvation, rather it is a theological exposition of the gospel of God. Hence we can call the book of Romans "the first Christian theology." One of the theological concepts Paul deals with in Romans is the *wrath of God*.

Paul begins the epistle to the Romans with the theme of the "*gospel of God*" (1:1). Then he moves to the "*power of God*" (1:16), the *righteousness of God* (1:17), and then to the "*wrath of God*" (1:18). These doctrinal concepts are important markers in developing his argument with sustained logic. Before explaining the gospel of the righteousness of God, he explains the need for the gospel – sin and God's righteous retribution against sin. A careful reader can observe the parallel that links verses 17 and 18 of chapter 1. In verse 17, the *righteousness of God* is being revealed and in verse 18 the *wrath of God* is being revealed. In both cases the present tense is used. It describes that which is presently being revealed.

The wrath of God is an unpopular topic. Not only the liberals, but even the evangelicals have great reservations about it. Most of us think that the doctrine of the wrath of God will chase away sinners and seekers and hence we should not talk about it too much. But the God of love in the Bible is also a God of wrath, and righteous indignation. A.W. Pink noted that "a study of the concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness" (*Attributes of God*, 82). God's wrath against sin arises by necessity because of the justice of His law and the righteousness of His character.

Evangelicals justify their silence about the wrath of God by saying that God does not manifest Himself as a God of wrath in the New Testament. This is a false conclusion. For example, the most famous verse in the New Testament about the *love of God* (John 3:16) is immediately followed by a statement about the *wrath of God*. "He who does not obey the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him" (John 3:36). It is a shocking surprise that the Gospel of John which speaks so eloquently of God's love also speaks powerfully of His wrath. The wrath of God is a perfection (attribute) of God whether in the Old or New Testament. God is immutable (God is changeless in His being and purposes; sometimes called God's *constancy*).

What is the *Wrath of God*?

God's *wrath* (Greek: *orge*) "is His determination to punish sin" (Charles Hodge). The root meaning of the word is "to swell." It is His settled Indignation (William Hendriksen), "a divine response to human sin" (*Holman Bible Dictionary*). God's anger is His retributive justice against sin. It is a righteous and holy response to humanity's sinful, rebellious nature; God reacting in revulsion against sin. *Wrath* is perfectly consistent with His attribute of love, since His wrath is a

measured, controlled, just and reasonable expression of His righteous character, and His unflinching love when confronted with evil.

The wrath of God is totally different from human anger. God does not lose His temper or throw temper tantrums. His wrath is not selfish, vindictive, malicious, or spiteful revenge. It is quite different from man's emotional, momentary, selfish, and uncontrolled *anger* (Greek: *thumos*). The word "wrath" is found 12 times in Romans (1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4,5 and a total of 36 times in the New Testament).

The Present Wrath of God

The most important passage that deals with the wrath of God in Romans is found in 1:18-32. But the general theme of God's indictment of the world continues from 1:18-3:20. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom.1:18). God's wrath *is revealed*. It is in the present tense; it is currently expressed. We always think God's wrath *will be revealed* (future). Of course, there is an ultimate day of judgement in the future. But Paul is dealing with the present, ongoing manifestation of the wrath of God on sinful humanity. They are being punished right now by God "giving them over to the lusts of their hearts, to degrading passions, and to a depraved mind Rom.1:24, 26, 28). Sinners who rejected the revelation of the truth of God available to them through the created order are already under the wrath of God (1:18-20). The consequence of the wrath is divine abandonment (1:24-32). People possess some truth about God through creation but reject it. So God gave them over to do what they wish to do.

John MacArthur points out six features that characterize God's wrath in verse 18:

1. The Quality of God's wrath – It is divine, it is **of God**.
2. The Timing of God's wrath – It **is revealed**.
3. The Source of God's wrath – It is rendered **from heaven**.
4. The Extent of God's wrath – **against all**.
5. The Nature of God's wrath – against all **ungodliness and unrighteousness** of men.
6. The Cause of God's wrath – **who suppress the truth in unrighteousness**.

(Romans 1-8, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 62-68).

The wrath of God is revealed against all "ungodliness" and "unrighteousness" of men. These are two expressions of evil and wickedness – impiety against God (godlessness) and injustice against men; lack of reverence for God and lack of respect for fellow man. Ungodliness leads to unrighteousness. Man's enmity with God results in his enmity with his fellow man. God condemns humanity for spiritual and moral failure. The ungodly and unrighteous stifle,

suppress and oppose the truth about God because it challenges their sinful behavior and condemns it.

According to Paul the present wrath of God is God's righteous indignation occasioned by sin and expressed in divine judgment. When men *pervert* God's revelation, God turns them over to various *perversions*. When men reject the revelation of God *in nature*, He turns them over to that which is *not natural*. This passage reminds us that sin brings God's judgment, and *sin is* God's judgment. The sinful perversions and gross immorality which we see every day all around us will be judged on the final Day of Judgment, but these heinous sins have plagued humanity because of the present wrath of God. *God judges sin with sin. Sin is both a cause and an effect. Sin is both the cause of God's wrath and a manifestation of His wrath.*

Three primary truths about the present wrath of God in verse 18 and following can be summarized in this way:

1. God's wrath is not selfish or arbitrary, but it is His holy and righteous response to human sin.
2. God's wrath is expressed for good reason since His power and divine nature are clearly revealed through the world He has made, and yet He is rejected by sinful people.
3. God's wrath is revealed because it was not from lack of knowledge or evidence that men abandoned God, but *in spite of* it. Therefore, man is without excuse.

God's Wrath is Both Present and Future

God's wrath is presently being revealed against sinners, and the coming wrath of God is yet to be revealed. We find these two different categories of the wrath of God throughout the Scripture. Even in Romans 1 & 2 this is beautifully illustrated by Paul. God's present wrath takes place in the present time (Rom.1:18-32), and God's future wrath is yet to come – "you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5). God's present wrath is largely passive, but His future wrath is active, and no one can miss it. God's present wrath is reversible, His future wrath is not.

Deliverance from God's Wrath

God's present wrath is a "judicial abandonment" and it is not an eternal rejection or condemnation in hell. All the "prodigal sons" who are sickened by sin and who want to be forgiven and delivered can still return to the Father in repentance and faith. This is the good news of the Gospel. God's wrath toward sin has been satisfied in Christ because His wrath was poured out on Him at Calvary. Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.....for in it the righteousness of God is revealed" (Rom.1:16-17). This is the message of Romans, "the most significant piece of literature the Lord would ever commission His most prolific evangelist to write" (Swindoll).

