

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Romans 1:16-25

Sermon Title: "The Wrath of God and the Salvation of Jesus" (A Journey through Romans)

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Here are a few things to understand about Paul's letter to the Romans. We are laying down a foundation before getting into the letter. {SLIDE}

First, Paul is writing to a group of new Christians who live in the capital city of Rome.¹ They are just beginning to understand what it means to be a Christian, and so their faith is quite young and quite immature. Paul writes to these people, telling them to work on their faith so it becomes well-established. They need constant instruction and practice in order to grow spiritually.

Second, Paul writes to these baby-faced Christians who live in a non-Christian world. They are surrounded by many Roman people who hold onto old pagan rituals and traditions. Any good Roman would hold to these traditions of worship and conduct – would practices them as a part of their daily lives – but not all of them are sanctioned by God. God doesn't approve of their sacrifices to other gods. God doesn't approve of stone idols that sit on shelves and stand in living rooms. To top it off, the Caesar goes around

¹ Much of the following comes from Thomas Nelson Publishers, *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)*, cf. 1876-1877.

calling himself lord, and he fancies himself as some gods who has come down from heaven. It might be dangerous to live in Rome and call Jesus Lord and not the emperor of the civilized world. So Paul wants those new Christians to realize where they live is shaky ground, and yet they must grow in faith.

Lastly, there was already a church established in Rome before Paul got there. These new Christians most likely had traveled from Jerusalem “following the Resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost.”² They were Jews and Gentiles alike, and they witnessed the power of God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They chose to believe, and carried their beliefs back home to Rome. There, they gathered together in homes and built up a fellowship and started a church, so to speak. Not a church like the huge one in Vatican City called St. Peter’s Basilica. More like small gatherings of followers in several house throughout Rome.

{SLIDE} So, what we should have in mind at the start is that the Christians are young in faith, their church is brand-spanking new, and they live in a society that contradicts everything they believe. Let us start with these as we look at our reading for today.

² Ibid., 1876.

Oh, and a bit of a warning: What we will talk about will start off bad before it gets better. We have to commence with the negative before we arrive to the positive. The negative being the wrath of God. Paul mentions it to these new Christians: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”³

God is revealing himself to us all the time. God revealed himself through Jesus Christ, whom these new Christians witnessed on a cross, outside an empty tomb, and up in the sky. They know of God’s love and grace, because such things were opened to them by God. Along with love and grace, God reveals anger and wrath, especially toward those who don’t care to know anything about God.

This might be a weak example, but I’m going to try it out anyhow. **{SLIDE}** When a parent interacts with a new baby boy or girl, there are a lot of smiles and laughter. The parent shows the baby how to talk and crawl and eat, among many things, and when the baby gets those, there is much celebration. However, the parent also shows disapproval when the baby doesn’t do something right. A smile turns into a frown, and laughter turns into more serious instruction. When

³ Romans 1:18.

the baby understands how to respond and act correctly, the smiles and laughter returns.

God rejoices with us, as we understand the things of God and do them. God laughs as his kingdom grows through our service and lovingkindness. God frowns when such things are not happening. God's disapproval is much more severe than a parents' disapproval. Parents do not show wrath as God may show wrath. Wrath is defined as anger, indignation, and even vengeance.

Why does God become wrathful? Because not all human beings are getting it right. {SLIDE} They do not follow God and respond to God as God expects. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth."⁴ Note toward whom the wrath is displayed. Toward the ungodly and wicked. Not toward the Christian who believes and tries to know more about God, but sin trips him or her up from time to time. God targets the sinfulness in those who work against God.

As one theologian John Stott puts it, this ungodliness and wickedness that Paul writes about "is the attempt to get rid of God and, since that is

⁴ Romans 1:18.

impossible, the determination to live as though one has succeeded” in getting rid of God.⁵ As another later theologian, Karl Barth, once put it, “the wrath of God is the judgement under which we stand in so far as we do not love the Judge.”⁶ The wrath of God falls on those in Jerusalem who heard of or even witnessed the death of Christ on the cross, and felt the earth quake under their feet, and saw the sky turn pitch dark in the middle of the day, and they chose to pass it all off as some freak occurrence. The wrath of God falls on those whom Paul spoke to in synagogues and amphitheatres, urging them to believe in Christ Jesus for their eternal security, and yet they passed off his words as just another hair-brained scheme. The wrath of God falls on the Caesar who thinks himself to be a god and loves all the attention he gets. The wrath of God falls on those Romans who surround these new Christians, who continue practicing what they’ve always practiced, oblivious to their own destruction.

God’s wrath comes upon those who choose not to believe. They act as though there is no God, or they live their lives as though this God cannot touch them for anything they do. They invent reasons for not believing. They roll their eyes, scoff faith entirely, and tell us to leave them alone, when the subject of God

⁵ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, 72.

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 42.

comes up. They do not see how they add to their ungodliness. Those who work against God don't see how their wickedness drives them away from God and to their eternal destruction.

And the most curious things about all of this is that people know there is a God. {SLIDE} It is deep within all of us to know there is a God. Paul says, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So they are without excuse..."⁷ We all know it. We cannot say that we are ignorant of it. Why do we have so many exercise DVDs we could purchase and imitate on TV? Why do we watch so-called "reality shows" with celebrities doing things we would never do? Why do we try to dress like the popular kids and why do the popular kids have to keep up an image? Because all of us know there is more to life than what we see. There is something greater than us, possibly Someone beyond our imagination that we want to imitate. Maybe that One out there is the One we want to know. God has already revealed himself as the only One we ought to know. He is the only God who gives us life and purpose and joy. We all know

⁷ Romans 1:20.

this deep within. Some of us realize it is God and we pursue God. Others, sadly, get it wrong, and God's wrath falls down on them.

When people first saw the sun rise, they didn't think of the God who created the sun. They believed the sun to be a god, and so they worshipped it. When people viewed the stars, they didn't thank the God who put them in the sky. They falsely believed that the stars determine their fate, so they worshipped them. All of these bad, ungodly practices piled on top of each other, one at a time, and they create more false worship of animals and planets and even people. People also worship objects like money and possessions. Their lusts turned to greed and arrogance, power and wealth.

And then some turned all of this worship into a system of practical thinking. They called it philosophy or whatever name they wanted to give it. They carefully honed their philosophy, making it fit their way of thinking that sounded comfortable. They believed themselves to be the only ones to hold greater knowledge about the world or life itself. These baby-faced Christians in Rome would be surrounded by many who would call themselves philosophers, free thinkers, possessors of great minds. People are like that today: they let too much thinking get in the way of

seeing God. Their great brains cannot fathom that there is a God who loves them. There is a God who reveals himself to us, especially in the form of Jesus Christ. This God doesn't want alternative thinking, false worship, and destructive practices. This God wants us. God wants a relationship in which we want to know more about God, and God wants to reveal more to us.

{SLIDE} I said it was going to start off bad before it got good. Here's the good part, the good news. We go back to Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," Paul writes, "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jews first and also to the Greek." Paul is not ashamed of what he knows about Christ, and how others might mock him for it. Paul is not embarrassed to put his faith in one Man, who conquer sin and death for the good of all, even if the intellectual know-it-alls have another opinions. Whenever Paul gets to the city of Rome, he will enter with no shame or fear, and will glad debate with anyone, and happily argue with everyone, just as long as the gospel message gets out and people have a chance to escape God's wrath.

Paul wants these new Christians, Jewish and Gentile alike, to do the same. He wants them to continuing believing as they do, no matter what

tensions they face. They were once in Jerusalem, when Jesus died and rose. They were present when disciples started speaking in different tongues on Pentecost, each talking about Christ in foreign languages. They took the leap of faith in Jerusalem, and chose to live an unusual yet abundant life for this Savior and God. They went back to their hometown of Rome in order to spread the message about Jesus. No matter what may come their way, no matter how much they buck the system and refuse to live like everybody else is living, Paul wants them to stick to their faith. Even if the Roman Caesar calls himself lord and expects others to worship him, and if not they will be tortured and killed, Paul wants the new Christians to feel no shame, experience no fear.

“The one who is righteous will live by faith,” he tells them.⁸ You have a good thing going. You are determined not to get rid of God, but to grab hold of God with your very lives. You choose to love the Judge, knowing that judgement is favorable on those who accept and follow Christ. Do not stop. You have escaped the wrath of God by doing what God wants you to do. You have a young faith that needs time and effort to grow and mature. As it does, you will be able to stand against anything with God’s help. In time,

⁸ Romans 1:17.

you will be able to argue with those who mock you, and offer them the chance to escape God's wrath by believing in his Son.

{SLIDE} Jesus says back in John 3:36, "Whoever believe in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath." Talking about God's wrath is not a pleasant thing. Both Paul and Jesus himself say that there is punishment, and severe punishment, for those who try to write off God and refuse to follow Christ. However, the opposite is more glorious, more agreeable. Both Paul and Jesus say that if we have faith, and faith that grows, there is reward. There is a prize. There is everlasting life with no pain or problems.

This is what God wants, not the other for everybody. God really wants his Son to be trusted.⁹ God really wants to see us all alive and well. Everyone, include God, would benefit in the end.

⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, cf. 225.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News: what we deserve to have, Jesus has carried for us: sin and destruction and death. Jesus is the source of eternal life, and we can have such life when we accept him and believe. Believe this good news, brothers and sisters: In Jesus Christ you and I are forgiven! Thanks be to God! Amen.