

Now that Paul has laid out his introduction--he has introduced himself to the Romans, and he's also set forth the main point of the entire book--he starts to lay out his entire case. He's going to lay out the Gospel. But he starts in what is kind of a surprising way. He starts by talking about sin. Now, maybe we consider that to be a little bit surprising, because we ask: "Well, why didn't you start with something else, Paul? Why didn't you start with Jesus or some other thing? Why do you start talking about the Gospel by talking about sin?" But the reason for this, Christians, is because if we don't understand sin, we won't understand the Gospel. If we don't see our sinful nature, if we don't see sin for what it is, there's no way we're ever going to be able to appreciate why we need Jesus. Paul has to show us that we are saved by faith alone and in no other way. And so that's why he begins where he does, talking about God's mercy by first talking about his wrath.

So Paul begins in verse 18, when he says: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." So our basic problem, Paul tells us, is that we are sinners. We stand under the wrath of God. And because of that sin, he says, God has revealed his righteous anger, his righteous wrath, his righteous judgment. Because all of us by nature deserve judgment. All of us by nature deserve damnation. As Paul goes on to say in chapter 3, all of us by nature have fallen short of the glory of God. This is our most basic problem. It is at the very heart of everything that has gone wrong in our lives. Our basic problem is not that we have broken lives. Our basic problem is not that we have a hard life. Our basic problem is not that there is evil out there in the world, somebody else's problem. Our basic problem, Paul says, is that we are sinners, rebels against our Creator. And we stand under his wrath.

But the worst part of this is that the natural man doesn't want to admit that. He tries to suppress it. He tries to not admit it. He doesn't want to say that he is a sinner. He doesn't want to say that he deserves the judgment of God. And this, Paul says, is the worst thing of all, not even admitting to who we are by nature.

Because wrath is the one thing that the unbeliever refuses to accept. They could accept anything else about God. They could say that God is love. That sounds good. They could say that God is good. That sounds good too. They can even say that God is all-powerful. They can get behind that. But the one thing they can't accept is God's wrath. It doesn't sound like him, they say. How could a good God be angry with sin? How could a good and loving God punish sin? It doesn't seem to fit. But the reason why they do this is because, honestly, they want to hold onto their sin. They want to deny the truth so that they don't have to admit that they deserve judgment. There is no God, they say, so there's no Ten Commandments either. There is no God, they say, so there is no judgment. There is no God, they say, so I can keep doing what it is that I'm doing. I don't have to stop. I don't have to give it up. I am not guilty. There is no God, they say, so I am not a sinner! And in this way, they try to suppress the truth, to deny the reality of how we stand by nature before God.

But Christians, God's wrath is necessary. How could God be good if he didn't punish sin? How could God be righteous if he didn't do something about sin? And so Paul begins here talking about wrath so that we see who we are before this God, so we can see it clearly and not deny it because of our sins.

But Paul also tells us that it is foolish to even attempt to deny this truth. It is foolish, because it's so clear. This is what he means when he goes on to say, verses 19 and 20: "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." So Paul says, then, that God reveals himself to all people through his creation. He has clearly shown that he is the Lord through the things that he has made. And everyone in the world knows this. Everyone in the world sees this, even if they try to deny it or distort. Because when we look at the universe, Christians, when we look around us at all the things that God has made, when we look at the trees, we look at the hills, we look at the stars even, all of the great wonder of creation, we can see the glory of God. It is clear to us. God reveals himself in it. As we said in our Psalm, Psalm 8: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"

And this isn't an accident, either. It's not like we're just looking out into the world and saying, "Oh, I guess there is a God." No, God shows himself through these things clearly, so that all people know that he exists. All people know that he is the Lord. And yet, all these people experience his work, his goodness every day, firsthand. Everything that we have, for example, everything that we receive comes from him, whether we are a believer or an unbeliever, just and unjust alike. We all get what we have from the Lord. As Paul says in Acts, chapter 14: "He did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." So even to the unbelieving world, God has done all of these wonderful and great things and shown himself through those works.

But the unbeliever rejects that. He doesn't want to admit it. He suppresses the truth and tries to say something else. And it is for this reason, Paul says, that they are without excuse. They can't go to the judgment seat of God and say "I didn't know God," because God has revealed himself. They can't go to the judgment seat and say, "Well, it wasn't clear. I didn't get a clear picture of what was happening," because God has made it clear. God has revealed himself through these things, and all of us should believe him for that reason alone. What we see in creation should be enough for every man, woman, and child to believe in the Lord our God. But they don't, because they reject that truth. They suppress it in unrighteousness. And this ingratitude, this denial is enough to condemn us all.

Now, I think this is a good point to answer a question that sometimes comes up from time to time, and that is the question: "Well, what happens to those who never hear the Gospel? They never got an opportunity. What happens to them?" Paul tells us very clearly that this is not an excuse either. Because these people received the revelation of God. They have seen what he has done in his creation. But they too have suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. They too have turned away from the Lord. So they too deserve the judgment which falls upon all of us because of sin. Now, what judgment God is going to give exactly is up to him. He has not revealed that to us. But they are not innocent for that reason. They too stand under wrath. They too have rejected the Lord.

We also have to see in connection with that, Christians, that God doesn't owe them anything. He doesn't owe anybody anything. Grace is not grace if God owes it to you. Grace is not grace if you somehow deserve it. God shows his mercy to us because we didn't deserve it. But all have turned aside. All have gone astray. All deserve wrath for their ingratitude. And if God chooses to save us, it is because of his mercy alone. To say anything less than that is to distort the Gospel itself.

But what happens after people suppress the truth? What do they do? Paul tells us: they fall into idolatry. As he goes on in verses 21 through 23: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." So the mind, then, takes what it knows about God, and it twists it. It changes it into something else. Our minds have become futile. Our hearts have become darkened. By nature, our minds latch on to what are lies. We become totally disconnected from reality. We are not seeing the world as it is, because we're denying the most basic truth about it, the fact that God is the Lord. But yet, even though we're disconnected, the natural man still thinks that he knows how the world works. He still thinks that he knows the truth, so he thinks that he is wise. But this is foolish, because he doesn't understand it. He has turned the truth of God into a lie and turned away from the Lord.

But as we are all created to worship--it's part of our nature, it's part of who we are. We have to worship something. But because we by nature have turned away from the Lord, we turn to something else, and we turn that into our God. That is what we mean by idolatry. And this idol doesn't have to be worshipping images or worshipping animals as God as it was in Paul's time (though sometimes I wonder if those things aren't coming back in our day and age). But it could be anything. Anything that we set up in the place of God. Anything that we think is going to help us. Anything that we think can provide for us. It could be money. It could be fame. It could be our job. It could be the government. It could be anything. Anything that we put in God's place is an idol. And in doing so, we worship the creature rather than the creator. We have worshiped the thing that God made instead of the God who made it. This also explains why there are so many religions in the world, because they turn away from the truth of God and latch on to the lie and worship that instead. Anything, they say, except the Lord.

But, of course, we might ask at this point: "Well, what if somebody says that they believe in God? Is that good enough? Is that what Paul is talking about?" We have to ask a couple of questions. The first question is: who? Who is this God that you claim to worship? Who do you serve? And the reason why that question is important is because Paul does not talk about any god. He's not talking about an idea of god. He's not talking about some generic creator up there taking care of us. That's not good enough. What he is talking about is the God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the most holy Trinity. This is why we say the creeds, Christians. It's why we say "I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, his Son, and in the Holy Spirit," because who God is matters. He is not a generic god. He's not just a creator. He is the Lord who has revealed himself to us.

But the second thing we should ask someone is: "Do you live as if what you believe is true?" Because you could say, "I believe in God," but then not live like it. Because truth is never just

information, Christians. It's never just something that God presents to us and says, "Do you accept this as true?" and just leave it at that. Truth means something. It means something for our daily lives. So if there's a disconnect between the two, there's a problem. Take what Paul says, for example, in verse 21: "Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." Their words and their actions do not match with each other, and they fell into sin for that reason. So, no, it's not enough to just say "I believe in God" and leave it at that. We must say that we worship the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and show that by the way that we live.

Now, Paul is going to continue this section in the rest of this chapter when he talks about the effects of sin and the outcomes of it. And we'll get to that next week, Lord willing. But what does this section here today mean for us? I think the one basic message that we should hear from this today is to take sin seriously. Because we can see how sin leads us away from God. We can see how sin, being so serious, leads us to worship something other than God. And it will lead us and leave us under the wrath of God. So we need to take sin seriously, as seriously as God takes it, in fact. Because when we do that, then we will take Christ seriously too. Because we only take Christ as serious as we take sin. If we don't think sin is all that big a deal, if the talk of sin makes us feel uncomfortable or makes us wonder why we're talking about it all, then we're not going to see the need for Christ. We're not going to understand why he had save us. But when we see the seriousness of sin, Christians, then we'll see just how seriously we need Jesus. We will see why we need to be saved, and what it means to follow after him. So let us take our sins seriously, as seriously as the Bible does, so that we take Jesus seriously too.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are coming to judge the world in righteousness. Do not look upon us according to our sins, but look upon us according to your Son, Jesus Christ, whom you have given for us. In his name we pray. Amen.