

“The Bad News”
Romans 1:18-32
September 16, 2007
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Assume for a minute you hear of a 19-year-old mother of two in Indonesia who has never been outside of her remote rural village.

She is one of the wives of a domineering Muslim man who allows her no access to learning or outside information.

And her father did the same when she lived in his home.

She has never so much as heard that there is a Jesus.

Does the Bible actually teach that she will go to hell when she dies if she has not trusted in Jesus as her Savior?

The biblical text for today begins to evoke and respond to some very large questions - like the one I've just asked and others:

Is God truly angry with people? - How does the love of God fit with his wrath?

How can God be angry with people who've never even heard of Jesus?

And aren't all religions people's attempt to know and respond to God and won't God honor that?

Romans 1:18-32 begins to answer these and other related questions.

What do you think the following means?

The Apostle Paul in Romans 3:10-12, quoting from the OT, writes:

“As it is written, there is none righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who **seeks** God.

All have turned away, they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good, not even one.”

Just generally what do you think it means?

It's fairly simple isn't it: not anyone, on his or her own, measures up the holy standard of God.

In fact, everyone turns away from God.

Everyone? That young Indonesian woman?

Your non-Christian grandmother? You and me?

Last week, from the first 17 verses of this 1st chapter of Romans we saw that Paul's mission in life was to be a servant of Jesus Christ.

He calls Jesus the "good news" by which we can have a relationship with the eternal God.

In the section of the letter that begins at 1:18, Paul interrupts what he started in the first 17 verses.

If we were to outline the first chapters of Romans it would look like this:

1:1-17 Introduction of the good news

That introduction, ends with "verse 17 "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Now if you look ahead to 3:21 and following you will see that Paul resumes the same subject he introduced in verse 17.

Romans 3:21-22 "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

This is essentially the same as 17.

Beginning in 3:21 Paul will flesh out what he began in the introduction – the good news.

But in 1:18 all the way through 3:20, in a long parenthesis, Paul spells out the bad news.

Look please at Romans 1:18 "The wrath of God is being revealed!"

It is not that Paul delights in talking about such a dark subject, but to **not** speak of it would be the most despicable thing he could do.

If, for example, you had treatable cancer and your doctor didn't tell, you that would not be gracious but malevolent.

Today we look at the first of three parts of this bad news:
READ Romans 1:18-32

Paul actually begins the "bad news" by giving the conclusion of the matter -the proverbial "bottom line":

Look at 1:18 again - "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

God is angry.

Now, I didn't make that up.

I know we want to think of God only as loving and forgiving but God says he is pouring out his wrath on the sin of people.

How can we speak of God as ANGRY!?

We must remember that God's anger is **not like** so much of our anger.

It is not that God has a temper and he flies into irrational rages wherein he maliciously and spitefully vents his frustration.

God's wrath is his "holy hostility to evil, his refusal to condone it...it is his just judgment upon it." (Stott p72)

God abhors sin.

One man wrote, "As long as God is God he cannot look with indifference as his creation is destroyed and his holy will is trodden underfoot. Therefore he must meet sin with his mighty and annihilating reaction." (Nygren in Moo p100)

How do we reconcile our concept of a loving God with God's wrath?
In fact, it is not difficult at all.

God could not be a loving God if he didn't react to sin. What kind of a person would see the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery or child abuse and not express anger at the wickedness of it - in fact a lack of anger would show a lack of love.

God's wrath is very consistent with his love. (see Cranfield p29)

And how is the wrath of God being revealed?

In chapter 2 Paul will talk about the **future** judgment of God on sin 2:5 "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

And it is true that, in the **past**, on the cross God revealed his wrath against sin when God the Son died.

In 3:25 we will read "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement" meaning that, for us, God's wrath was poured out on Jesus.

Those are two powerful ways that God's wrath has been and will yet be poured out on sin.

But here in verse 18 Paul is writing of something more immediate.

The word "revealed" is in the present, passive, indicative - God's judgment on sin is being revealed all the time.

250 years ago Friedrich Schiller wrote, "The **history** of the world is the judgment of the world." Friedrich von Schiller

Every day we all reap the consequences of a world steeped in sin.

We see it in the actions of governments, in the attitudes and actions of others and in our own thoughts and actions.

Here in Romans 1, three times, Paul also says it this way, "God gave them over..."

I'll speak more to that later but God lets sin have its way in people.

I think there can be no doubt that the Bible says God is angry and he pours out his anger.

But on whom? **On whom does God say he will pour out his wrath?**

V18 – On “men who suppress the truth”

To “suppress the truth” means to not allow the truth to have the appropriate impact on the way they think and act.

It is to know the truth but to intentionally ignore it.

And how do they suppress the truth?

They suppress the truth **by their wickedness.**

But before Paul describes this in more detail, he describes **what truth** they suppress, reject and ignore.

Look at verses 19-20 “since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

What truth do people suppress?

What does verse 19 say?

It says there is something very specific **about** God that is plain to all people because God has made it plain to them.

This information is not accidental.

This is an important truth being taught here:

This truth about God, which people suppress, is very specific and God very intentionally gives it.

No one can legitimately later say God was unfair because he didn’t let them know.

God has made it plain.

But what is it about God that they know?

Verse 20 - “God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature”

Interesting play on words; what is invisible is plainly seen.

According to this verse, every person knows **two things** about God:
They know his “**divine nature**” - that He is God and he is there.

And they know his “**eternal power**” - that he is all-powerful.
They know there is a God and that he is the powerful
creator of creation.

This is sometimes called “natural revelation” or “general revelation.”
It is natural because it is seen in the natural order around us.
It is general in that it is available to everyone. See Stott, *Romans*, 73)

How is this truth about God revealed?

Look at the end of verse 20:

These truths about God “are clearly seen, being
understood **from what has been made**”

That’s right, this knowledge of God comes from just living in this
world, from seeing what God has created.

And again, notice that the world around us gives us this very
specific information about God.

The Psalmist wrote, “The heavens declare **the glory** of God.”

In Acts 14 Paul speaking to the Gentiles in Lystra said, “God
has not left himself without testimony: He has shown **kindness**
to by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season; he
provides you with food...”

Through these verses God declares that much is known about him
before one word of the Bible was written or any missionary ever sent.

The fact that there is a sovereign, eternal, kind, powerful God is
declared, is revealed by the very physical world around us.

But let’s answer another question:

How clear is this information about God?

1:19 - Does everyone **understand** the information about
God? Yes!

Why? Because God made it plain!

In the verse God says, “They are **clearly** seen”

And he says they are “**understood**”.

And verse 21 says, “**They knew God**”.

In verse 32 Paul says everyone knows something else about God. “They know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death.”

How is that possible without a Bible?

In 2:14-15 “when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”

I’ll speak to that more next week but look back at 1:32 – Everyone knows something of right and wrong just from human conscience, as seared by sin as that conscience may be.

Again I ask, is this specific information about God clear?

Absolutely.

It’s amazing: from nature and conscience we know the true God is there,

we know that he is all-powerful,

that he is kind,

that he has expectations of people and to

violate those expectations is to deserve death.

What is Paul and God’s point?

Accurate knowledge of God is supplied (by God) every day and all day to every human being - and they see and understand what is being said - it is plain to them.

Here is the way the Psalmist wrote of it:

Psalm 19:1-4 “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.
 There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.
 Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

But again, **what do people do with that truth** about God?

They “suppress it” - they intentionally ignore it, confuse it, and put it out of their minds.

The John Templeton Foundation says it is dedicated to supporting science as it investigates the big questions of life.

The current issue of *The Atlantic* (not even remotely a religious periodical) has a piece by the Templeton Foundation asking the following question of several experts: “Does the Universe have a Purpose?”

Lawrence Krauss, professor of physics and astronomy at Case Western Reserve University responds:

Does the universe have a purpose? Unlikely. Tomorrow night if we look up at the stars and they have been rearranged into a pattern that reads, “I am here,” I think even the most hard-nosed scientific skeptic would have to suspect something was up. But no such unambiguous signs have been uncovered... This is why a scientist can conclude that it is very unlikely that there is any divine purpose. If a creator had such a purpose, she could choose to demonstrate it a little more clearly to the inhabitants of her creation.” (The Atlantic, October 2007, 22)

God says Krauss looks at the same sky you do and he chooses to suppress what is plainly revealed.

Even a professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary wrote, “From looking at the natural world alone... We can know next to nothing about the creator’s qualities – (whether) one deity or a team; alive or dead, a young or (incapacitated) deity.” (The Atlantic, October 2007, 23)

This Fuller Seminary professor looks at the same Bible I do and says we can’t know anything about God from the created order.

Francis Crick, one who discovered DNA said, "Biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but rather evolved" (William Dembski, "Science and Design," First Things, Oct. 1998, No. 86, p. 25, 21). See Piper sermon, Sept 27, 1998

Even Richard Dawkins wrote, "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose." (Ibid)

Odd, isn't it? They even remind themselves to suppress what is so apparent.

Romans 1:21 tells us exactly what everyone does with the truth about God. "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

There was more than enough knowledge for them to know it was God and thus they should have honored (glorified) Him as God.

And also there was enough knowledge of God as the source of all the good things of life that they should have thanked him.

But instead of honoring him and thanking him, mankind thanks either himself, or his "lucky stars" or something else – anything else.

Imagine the wickedness of knowing God gave something and then deliberately acknowledging someone or something else as the giver.

The gratitude some people have for "mother earth" for "mother nature", the honor they show for a natural selection process, for evolution - as if in awe of the wisdom and power of evolution and neglecting the God who is behind it - what ingratitude!!

One author I read said he is so awed by the universe around us that he sometimes feels like bowing down and thanking "Big Bang." (In Stott, 74)

In centuries past and in other cultures today, others worshipped the sun or the moon. And in our culture, we worship the process.

Yes, "worship" - we give it credit, we ascribe worth

to it - credit and worth that belong to God alone.
That is idolatry.

We have ability to work and make money and we ascribe honor to ourselves for having the intellect and energy and health to do it instead of being humbly grateful to God for breath itself - that is idolatry - ascribing honor to the creature rather than to the creator.

To ascribe to any other deceased saint any place of honor that belongs to Christ alone is idolatry.

To attempt to access God's grace by not going directly to him and instead going some other way, through a medium such as some dead Christian, is to depreciate the tender love and concern of God.

It depreciates God and places another in a place that belongs to God alone. - It is idolatry!

To sin and then attempt to make up for that sin by doing penance or just doing more good to make up for it, is idolatry.

We are saying that we are capable of atoning for our own sin when the truth is that only God accomplishes atonement.

We are idolizing ourselves - ascribing to ourselves an ability that belongs to God alone - It is idolatry.

In V21 we are told that instead of praising and thanking God, people perverted the knowledge of God and turned to serving someone or something other than God.

Being the recipient of God's common grace, they should have at least recognized him as God, worthy of honor and gratitude.

But instead of thinking correctly about God their thinking became futile – they disconnected from the reality that is so obvious and imagined other explanations for what they were seeing.

Now, I know there are many people who see creation and claim they don't see God in it at all.

But that is precisely God's point - they have the evidence but they refuse it.

Let's summarize what we've seen thus far:

God is pouring out his wrath on people now because they have suppressed the truth about him, which he has made so obvious in nature.

They have rejected God, as he is knowable from creation.

Now what is God's conclusion back at the end of Verse 20?

So that all people, are what? "Without excuse."

Gone is the excuse that they just didn't know it was God. They can't say, "If only I had known it was you, I would have served you.

Or "I didn't think there was sufficient evidence to affirm that you existed.

"I didn't think there was sufficient evidence for me to build my life around you. - So I did the best I could."

What does God say? "You are without excuse!"

And what is God justly, and lovingly, obligated to do with such a patently false intentionally obstinate excuse? -

"The wrath of God is being revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth..."

Do you remember the 19-year-old Indonesian mother of two I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon?

It's hard for us usually to imagine that such an "innocent" person would be condemned by God.

What if I told you that God appeared to her and told her that he is the God and that he alone is the all-powerful creator of the world (obviously indicating her need to honor him alone - to worship and obey him alone - after all he is God.

But what if you learned that instead of honoring Him as God, she rejected him and worshipped an idea of God that she made up or was handed to her by others.

Now remember, in my illustration, God came to her and told her who he was but she rejected it and worships a god of her own making instead.

Furthermore she allows herself to do things that she knows are contrary to the law of God.

She serves herself. Yes she serves others as well but she serves herself rather than God.

She indulges in thoughts and actions that are contrary to what she knows are right. (2:14-15)

And it is not that God came to her once but he came to her every day and reminded her of who he was and she heard him but she refused to believe him -

She intentionally exchanged what she heard from God for her own ideas or those handed to her by others.

Now, I ask you - is she innocent? - What does God say in Romans 1?

But we want to argue with God and so we say, "What about her belief in a god - what about her faithful devotion to her religion?"

Surely, she's trying - doesn't that count?

We are all tempted to think that religion is man's attempt to find God.

We are led to believe that all religions, or at least most of them, and particularly the religions that believe in one God, are a good first step to the truth, and that if people are just true to their faith - surely God will accept that effort.

What you are going to see in the next verses is that religion is not mankind's attempt to **find** God but mankind's attempt to **avoid** the true God.

You see, God has a very different view of world religions than do many of the professors of the Survey of Religions courses in our universities and very different than many anthropologists.

Look at 1:22-23: What is the first thing people tend to do in their rejection of **the God they see clearly in nature**?

"Claiming to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man, birds, animals and reptiles."

They build a religion that rejects God and instead

worships something God has made.

The first sin of suppressing truth of God and refusing to acknowledge God, leads to the next sin of creating an alternative.

All over the world this is still being done today.

Go most anywhere and you can find the strangest concoctions of religions and philosophies - a worship and service of the most bizarre idols and man-made gods.

And in our own culture we have simply replaced the wooden idols with our own egos. We have become the gods of our lives.

And what is the result? 1:24-25 “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.”

Do you see that phrase? - “God gave them over”.

If you look at V26 you’ll see it again.

If you look at V28 you’ll see it a third time.

The verb “gave them over” indicates both God letting them go in their desired direction and also God actively pushing them along that path to get them to see the futility of it – to experience the consequences of their choices.

Their idolatry leads to sexual impurity.

Exactly why, I don’t know, but that it does is evident all over the world.

Like India’s Hinduism, so Bhutan’s Buddhism worships the phallus.

It is Bhutan’s most celebrated symbol.

Homes are painted with 10-foot-tall images of male genitals.

Monastery entrances are adorned with carved wooden erections. (The Atlantic, Oct 2007)

But it is not just other religions; America has an obsession with sex.

Whenever people reject God it seems that inevitably it results eventually in sexual immorality and every other form of evil mentioned in the latter verses of this chapter.

No, it is not that every person openly becomes a pervert, but that individually and collectively everything tends to run downhill morally.

And the final nail in the coffin of condemnation is verse 32.

“Although they know God’s righteous decrees that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

Much of the sense of right and wrong becomes twisted.

We find our entertainment in perversion.

So back to our original questions: **“How can God send an “innocent” Indonesian woman to hell?” “Could God be so unfair when she has never even heard of Jesus?”**

But hear God’s word, if that Indonesian woman goes to hell it will not first be because she has rejected Jesus but because she has rejected the knowledge of God she already has.

Assume for a minute that a man kidnaps and murders the president’s daughter.

The man is found guilty and sentenced to the electric chair.

The President offers the man a pardon, which the man refuses.

Why is the man going to die in the electric chair? Because he rejected the President’s pardon OR because he murdered the President’s daughter?

Clearly, it is because he has murdered.

No one is going to hell because they have rejected Jesus.

We are all condemned to God’s wrath because we have rejected the knowledge of God available to everyone.

Everyone deserves to spend eternity in hell.

That’s why we all need a Savior.

That’s why we need “good news”!

Not just the young Indonesian mother but also some here needs to come to the Savior.

The bad news is that we are under God's wrath.

The good news is that Jesus has made himself available to forgive and restore those who will come to him and trust in him as Saving - Lord.

Maybe this morning you are done with excuses - because you now see there is no excuse - You need the Savior.

Will you come to him today?

Here is the truth: there are two great demands of God on the lives of all humans - 1) that we exult in God's bounty to us (that's thankfulness), and 2) that we reflect or display his glory. Don't miss this. It is right there in verse 21: "Even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks." It means that God has created a universe in which we get the blessings and he gets the glory. And the way God gets the glory is by our exulting in him as the all-sufficient Giver of all things.

So here is the great lesson to be learned: the reason the mind evades, twists, distorts, manipulates and suppresses the truth of God is not mainly that we are mentally deficient, but because we are morally deficient. We suppress the Light of God's glory and power because we love the darkness of our own independence. We love our sins, our self-determination, and therefore we suppress the Truth that God is God and that we are to depend on him and live for his glory. Piper, Sept 13, 1998

Even believers suppress the truth when they engage in known sin, which weakens the conscience.

The issue of homosexuality was addressed in a message on August 26, 2007

As to verse 27 some have said that here is biblical justification to say that AIDS is the God-directed penalty for homosexuality. But the NASB, more closely following the Greek text says, “receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their **error**.” “Error” is a better translation than “perversion” because the “error” is expressed in verses 21-25 and the penalty is sexual perversion. Yes, sin carries its own consequences and yes, sexual immorality of all kinds has devastating consequences but that is not the point here.

Some suggest that it is perfectly “natural” for a homosexual to desire someone of the same gender; what Paul is here condemning is a heterosexual engaging in homosexual activity – that would be unnatural to that person. But Richard Hays has thoroughly refuted such exegesis providing ample evidence from that period to show that “natural” and “unnatural” are “very frequently used...as a way of distinguishing between heterosexual and homosexual behavior.” (Hays cited in Stott, 77-78)