

What May Be Known About God (1)

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[0 : 00] We're in our Roman series, working our way through the book of Romans, and this is our fourth look at this book. And last week we slowed down a little bit and we looked at just two verses, verses 16 and 17, and we saw that those two verses are the thesis statement of the whole book.

It's Paul's main point. And his main point was that the great message, the gospel, is not primarily good advice. It's not a call from God to us for moral conformity first or for even religious commitment, but it's actually good news.

It's a herald, a messenger, coming over the hill and making a pronouncement about something that's happened. And what happened is the gospel. It's Jesus Christ's death, life, death and resurrection for us, and that's the good news.

Now this week we also look at news, but it's not good news. It's bad news. It's the wrath of God. And I was going to try to say the word wrath, like Scottish people say it, but then I practiced and it didn't work well, so I decided not to. There's a special way of saying wrath here, I know, but I'm just going to stick to my American version.

[1 : 18] The wrath of God is the bad news today. And this is every Puritan preacher's favorite subject, but seriously we have to focus on it.

We need to focus on it because it's here. It's right there in the text. And it's one of the main points that Paul's making in this book. And also it's a fact.

The wrath of God is a fact that has to be dealt with. And there's a lot of caricatures about what we think about when we think about God's wrath out there. And so we need to come to the Bible and see what Paul has to say about God's wrath here.

And the point of the text is pretty simple actually. It's in line with last week's point because it follows directly on. And that's that if you want to talk about salvation, you got to talk about being saved from something.

And that's something from which human beings are saved. Paul's telling us here is the wrath of God. So let's think about God's wrath for a little bit this morning together. And we're going to ask, what is it?

[2 : 25] It's definition. What's the wrath of God? And then we're going to ask, why is it? And Paul's answer to that question is because every single human being knows God and doesn't know God at the very same time.

And then we're going to ask, where is it? And Paul's answer here in the very first verse is that the wrath of God is being revealed, that's in its right now.

And so we need to figure out where is it being revealed exactly? What does he mean by that? So what is it? Why is it? And where is it? And let's first ask, what is God's wrath?

It's definition. Now, it's tricky when you talk about God's wrath. Verse 18, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven. It's tricky when you talk about it because God's wrath is not like our wrath. It's not like human wrath at all. There are all sorts of degrees of human wrath, but at its very worst, human wrath is a spontaneous rage.

[3 : 32] It's volcanic eruption. It's getting so full of anger that you brim over and explode. And it can be expressed in all sorts of ways, but we think of the word wrath when we talk about human wrath like a bull in a china shop type anger, just pouring over like lava from a volcano.

And it could be expressed in all sorts of ways, but at its very worst, it's rage. It's deep rage. And well, but God, God's not like that.

So one of the things that theologians will consistently remind us of is that we can't read our emotional life. Our emotional experience is back into God.

We don't read it that way. We don't project our own attributes back into the very life of God that he's absolutely different from us, absolutely other from us.

And one of the key things is that God's attributes, who he is, all his characteristics, they are all entirely one. So just as much as God is justice, he is love, and just as much as he is love, he is just, and just as much as he is both of those, he is glorious, and just as much as he is glorious, he is holy.

[4 : 52] And all of those things exist are God always at the very same time. And so the big difference in human wrath and God's wrath is that, well, we all know, we've experienced this.

We, we can be wrathful, we can spill over like a volcano, and it's a zero sum game for us in that we can be completely wrathful without any love.

But not so with God. When God expresses his wrath, he is just as much perfect love at the very same time. When he is being fully just and expressing anger and wrath, he is love.

And when he is just, he is glorious. And when he is glorious, he is holy. And when he is holy, he is love and just and glory. And at the same time, he is always one. He, he, he, he's just changeless. You see? And so when we express wrath, we might, we might. It could be just, but for us, it could be loveless. But never so for God. God is always both simultaneously completely loving and just in expressing wrath at the very same time.

[6 : 06] And so the word here that Paul uses is the, the common word throughout the Bible for wrath, and it's a little Greek word, orgy, orge. And it comes often, especially in the Old Testament, right alongside another word.

And it's the word that we translate anger. And so often in the Old Testament, you'll see God's anger and God's wrath listed side by side and like in the Psalms in a kind of parallel sort of way.

And one of the reasons for that, this is so important, although a small point, is that God's wrath is not one of God's attributes.

God's wrath is not one of God's attributes. God is just. God is just, and the expression of God's justice towards unjust actions in this world is his wrath.

And you see, so wrath simply means punishment. And that's what it means here. For the wrath of God, the literally, it's the punishment of God has been revealed. And so wrath and punishment are not an, they're not an attribute of God.

[7 : 15] They're the expression externally of God's justice, because he is just. That's what he is. And so wrath is very simply an expression of God's justice and punishment towards sin.

And so anger is God's emotional response to injustice. And wrath is his punishment of injustice, his just response to injustice.

That's God's wrath. Hopefully that is simple enough, although we're talking about God, so it's not simple at all. It's very difficult. But he's always just. He's always loved, and he's always good all at the very same time.

It's completely unlike. It's completely unlike our wrath. And so we can't caricature it like it often gets caricatured in the popular world. And what that means, and I take this from kind of reading a whole Old Testament reading alongside Paul here, and that's that God's wrath is never revenge.

God's wrath is never revenge. God's wrath is never spontaneous outrage. He doesn't have emotional outbursts, and he doesn't act out of revenge.

[8 : 29] It's never either. And you can look. One of the great ways to see this is that you can go to the Old Testament law code and look at how unique the Old Testament law code was among ancient Near Eastern law codes.

And Old Testament scholars have repeatedly said this, that when you look at the way God set up Israel, Israelite society in the Old Testament, that it's unlike anything else that had ever existed. And that's because, for instance, in Leviticus 19, God gives all these laws, law after law after law, about how to structure the society and how to punish crime like any good society would have, right? And at the end of that, in Leviticus 19, 17, and 18, he says, now, in enacting these laws, do not hate your neighbor and never take revenge.

In other words, he's saying, when you structure your society and you have all these laws that govern it, never act, even against criminals, out of revenge or hatred, but only justice.

[9 : 38] In other words, it should crime the punishment, as we, in a cliché way, always say, the punishment should fit the crime, right? That's justice. And that was unique in all of history to the Israelite community.

No other ancient society works like that. And one of the most incredibly compassionate ways that this works out, that God, as an expression of his justice, not revenge, not hatred, for the sinner or the criminal, but simple justice, what is fitting, right?

So one of the ways this was expressed in a really remarkable way is in the idea of the cities of refuge. So if you've read the Genesis to Deuteronomy, you'll remember the cities of refuge idea. God comes to Israel and he says, look, if you accidentally kill another person, we call that, I think, well in the States we call that manslaughter, I assume it's the same here.

So if you accidentally kill another person, naturally, naturally, this was the law of the land in the ancient Near East. Naturally the spouse or whoever, the family member, is going to want to come and take revenge on you and kill you because even if it was an accident, in some type of farming accident or whatever, you accidentally killed them.

[10:56] And he says, but look, that's not justice. You do not deserve to have capital punishment committed against you. If you accidentally killed somebody. And so God said, set up these cities of refuge all over Israelite territory and if this happens to you, you can flee to one of these cities and the people there are required to protect you, not only so that an injustice won't be committed against you, but so that the people, the family of the victim who are so angry will not be given the opportunity to seek revenge.

They'll be protected themselves from committing a further injustice and seeking a punishment that's not fitting against you. You see? Now, this might not sound as revolutionary to you now, but look, nothing like this has ever existed in the ancient world and it reflected God's own personality that God's wrath is never an exhibition, never an exhibition of revenge or hatred, of casting people down just for the sake of it or anything like that.

It's a reflection of the fact that God is just, absolute justice, and that sinning against absolute justice means punishment is fitting.

And we all know that intuitively that that's true, that that makes sense. Now, maybe you're thinking, hold on a minute, what about Romans 12?

Maybe you're not. Maybe you're not thinking what you're thinking if you're not thinking it. And that's that in Romans 12, God says through Paul, never repay evil for evil, for vengeance is mine, declares the Lord.

[12:44] And he does say that, but the word that gets translated there, vengeance, comes from a root, the root word, it's a verb for justice.

And if you open up a dictionary that's different possible ways to translate this word, they'll tell you very quickly that it simply means to satisfy justice.

And so another way to say it is he says, never repay evil for evil, the satisfaction of justice is mine. In other words, you human being don't need to go out and try to make every unjust situation into a just situation through punishment.

I will do that in the end of time, he says there in Romans 12. So it means the exact same thing that we've been saying about God's wrath, that it's never revenge, it's never outrageous, spontaneous rage.

It's always according to justice where it's fitting. It's fitting. Now, just to close this first point, you know, God's, this idea of punishment, just punishment in the face of sin, you know, it makes so much sense.

[13:56] It makes so much sense to all of us because, well, our very society is rooted in this most basic idea as every society that's worked in all of history has been that we set up court systems and police systems because we know that punish, that crime demands just response.

And the reason societies exist like this is because they reflect God's own person because he is absolute justice and they reflect in a really imperfect way.

But look, we even know this to be true in our own personal lives. We know in our own personal lives that anytime somebody commits unjust acts against us or we commit an unjust act against somebody else, that sin never goes without some type of punishment.

Never, never, never. Because even when you decide to forgive somebody instead of pursuing the full weight of your wrath against them or whatever it might be, or the law, if it's a criminal issue, even when you decide to simply forgive, it's not like the punishment just disappears.

Where does it go? You swallow it. You're the one that has to take it in forgiveness. You swallow it and it goes deep down into your gut and you feel the pain of being sinned against and no justice, no retribution, nothing.

[15 : 25] You take it in your own being and you feel the weight of that punishment and it hurts and it's hard and that's part and parcel of forgiveness. I mean, this is just true, right? And so the first point is simply to say that we can't caricature God's wrath.

God's wrath is righteous response to injustice, to sin because he is just, because he's just his fitting, right?

So that's the definition of God's wrath in the Bible that Paul introduces here. But secondly, why God's wrath?

And Paul's answer here in verse 18, 19 and 20 is because we know God, but at the very same time we don't know God.

So he says, for what can be known about God is plain. His eternal power, his divine attributes have been clearly perceived ever since creation in the things that have been made and although we know God, we suppress the truth and unrighteousness.

[16 : 30] Now Paul here is describing how human beings know God and a lot of people have come to these couple of verses here, especially verse 19 and 20 and said that it says what can be known about God.

In other words, what Paul is saying here is that the knowledge of God, the simple knowledge that he exists is at least possible.

And from that, people have sought validation in constructing what we think of as traditional, rational arguments for the existence of God.

And many of you have heard these arguments, you know these arguments, you're familiar with them. They might be new to some of you, but you've probably heard them down the grapevine in some form and they go way back.

They go all the way back to Aristotle a couple hundred years before Jesus was born and they've been modified throughout history and people like Anselm and Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant and other people in the modern world.

[17 : 30] And here, I mean, there's truth there. Paul is saying you can go out and look at the natural order, the created natural order, the movement of the heavens and actually say something about God.

And you know, probably the two arguments that correspond to what Paul is saying here most closely is what we call the cosmological argument and the teleological argument.

Now those are fancy words, but they're pretty simple ideas. The cosmological argument, which you've definitely heard at some point, is simply that, well, that everything that happens in the world has some type of cause behind it.

Everything that happens in your life has some type of cause. Every effect has a cause and if you reach back far enough and you look for the cause behind the cause, behind the cause, behind the cause, eventually you have to ask, well, what caused the world?

And the only thing you can possibly say is that there has to be some type of uncaused cause, some original first cause that wasn't himself caused, right?

[18 : 36] Makes sense? That every effect has a cause, but there has to be a first cause. There has to be somebody who started it all, right? And that somebody that started it all is God, right?

That's the cosmological argument. Here there's the teleological argument, which works a little better probably, and it's also today known as the fine tuning argument.

And that's similar that the Earth and the Sun are so far apart and the Earth and the Moon are so far apart and the gravitational pull is negative 9.8 meters per second.

And if any of those things were off by one millionth of one millionth of a decimal point, then the Earth would have never been possible. And from what I'm told by scientists, apparently that's pretty much true.

And the Sun would have just blown up and we would have never, would have existed. And you know, when you look at how fine tuned it all is, there must, the order, there must be a God standing behind it all, somebody standing behind it all, or how could it possibly be?

[19 : 40] What are the chances? They're, well, one in trillions, scientists say, and that's ridiculous. So probably there must have been. And you know, now, maybe these arguments are helpful to you.

I don't know. You've probably heard of them before. Maybe they're not. For some people that they seem to be persuasive and for others they aren't. But I do think that you can say something like that based off, that Paul is giving us some validation here for looking out at the world and saying, yeah, I

mean, the existence of God makes a lot of sense.

But he's not just saying that. He's saying something, he's saying something more, more profound than that, because he doesn't, he's not just saying here that the knowledge of God is possible. He's saying here that every single human knows God, not just that they can know God if they think about it long enough. He's saying here that every single person knows God and has suppressed that truth and unrighteousness.

And that's why theologians and others have consistently come and said that what Paul's talking about here is not just some rational ability to reason to God, to look out at nature and form a syllogism of some sort and say, yeah, God must exist.

[21 : 00] He's saying more that he's saying that all of you, all of you know God by nature. By the very fact of simply being human. And historically we've called this intuitive knowledge of God, that every single person has an intuitive knowledge of God.

He says that they suppress the truth and unrighteousness. You can't suppress something that you don't have in the first place, that everybody has it.

Now there are all sorts of stories, stories of belief that of people coming from atheism or agnosticism or something like that into a position of faith in Jesus that confirm this type of idea of intuitive God knowledge that all human beings possess.

A.N. Wilson is one of the great examples, he is, many of you will be familiar with him, he is a journalist, English journalist, biographer, book writer.

You'll see his books in the windows of places like Blackwells and Waterstones. And in 2009 A.N. Wilson came to faith in Jesus and he had been raised in a religious home but in his mid-thirties he had come out and said that he didn't believe that he was an atheist, that he was thoroughly convinced and he writes about his conversion to Christianity in 2009 in a newspaper called The New Statesman.

[22 : 32] And in it he says, in my thirties I had laughed off all the arguments for God's existence. David Hume and Emanuel Kant had made short work of the cosmological argument.

But then, but then he said I realized that belief was not a matter of rational argument, that it involves the whole person and so I was drawn over and over again to the disconcerting recognition that so very many of the people that I had most admired and loved in life had been believers.

And then secondly, I was drawn back in by my experience of beauty. He said I would listen to Bach and Mozart and that beauty impressed me to the reality that I did indeed always believe in the beautiful, capital B, some absolute sense of beauty.

I couldn't get it beauty otherwise I didn't know where to go to say this is beautiful as we're saying.

Carl Jung, another German philosopher in the 20th century, he says something similar.

He says when he came to believe in God that he realized that arguing for God's existence was almost like arguing to somebody that a son said is beautiful.

[23 : 50] It just is. How do you do that? How do you convince somebody that what they're looking at is beautiful? Then thirdly, Wilson says then I was watching a whole cluster of friends and my own mother die over quite a short period of time and that convinced me of what I always knew that a purely materialist explanation for our mysterious human existence simply would not do.

That I didn't even know how to think that there was injustice and evil and suffering in the world unless I first believed in some absolute good and I knew it all along, he says.

Then finally he was writing a book on Nazi Germany a decade or so ago and he was going through Hitler's, he writes, insane atheistic ravings.

Then alongside Hitler I read Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book on ethics and I asked myself what sort of a mad world is created by those who think that ethics is purely a human construct?

I was convinced that it was only the Christians who made sense to me in their pronouncements about against Nazism based on absolute morality. So he says I realized that my conversion was middle-aged madness, my conversion to atheism.

[25 : 13] It was middle-aged madness, I was denying what I could never escape that I did at base, need to believe in God in order to be mad at God. Pius Lewis, if you've ever read his conversion story, he says almost the exact same thing.

He says that he was really struggling with suffering in his life and evil. He said but what I realized was I needed to believe in absolute good in order to even shake my fist at God in the first place.

That he intuitively knew the reality of the absolute, the supernatural the whole time. There's story after story like this. And so look, you never have to convince a child to believe in something that they can't see.

Every single child comes into this world by nature believing in the fantastical, believing in the supernatural. Every single child does. You never have to convince a child. You see atheism, disbelief saying that supernatural does not exist is something that you have to learn. It's not intuitive. It's against our own nature. It's not natural at all. It's unnatural. And so that's why theologians historically have said that Paul here, he's talking about something more than just rational argument for God's existence.

[26 : 27] He's saying that all of us possess intuitive belief and it comes through the ideals of beauty, the mystery of human consciousness, the deep need for the supernatural, the deep need for spirituality and purpose and meaning in the hope of ultimate justice and for the story that we are all so attracted to, the story of the hero who redeems, which gets played over and over and over again in every great novel and film.

It's the thing we can't stop wanting because it's true, because it's intuitive. We all believe by nature. And so why God's wrath? Why God's wrath? And the answer here is because we all know, but we don't want to know.

He's saying we all know, but we suppress that knowledge and sin. We push it down as it pushes into our hearts. And who is the they?

Look, this is so important to see. Who is the they that Paul is talking about here throughout this passage? The they, for what can be known about God is plain to them.

[27 : 43] Who's the them? And to know the answer to that, you have to reach back into verse 16 and 17. And there he says who the they is and the they is Jew and Gentile.

In other words, in Paul's ancient category, who's a Jew and Gentile? Well, that's everybody. You're a Jew or a Gentile, one or the other. He's saying everybody knows God and everybody, you, me, has suppressed the truth.

Not just atheists, but everybody. So there's a lot of different ways to do that. That's what he's talking about here. One of the ways is to say, I don't believe God exists. We call that atheism, but that's not the only way.

I mean, he mentions other ways here in the passage in verse 22 and 23 that you start to worship things like creatures, birds and trees and rocks. I mean, that's a more ancient way of saying no to God, of suppressing the truth that you know and unrighteousness, but, you know, the more modern way, we don't do that way as much anymore, although it still exists.

But there's a modern correspondence to that way, and that's worshiping, desiring above all else, our own accomplishments and making them into God.

[28 : 53] It's sex and money and power and beauty. That's the modern replacement for birds and trees and stones. It's everybody, all of us, is what Paul's saying here.

And at the root of it, it's the desire to be autonomous, to be self-governing. In other words, it's not ever, it's not ever that anybody truly doesn't believe in the supernatural and what they can't see in some absolute.

It's not that at all. It's that we want to have power, we want to have power over that. And that's exactly what you see in the root of sin. In Genesis 3, in Genesis 11, when Satan says, do you want to be like God?

Not do you want to be under God's authority, but Eve said, I want to be like Him. I want to rise up to the heavens. I want to build a ziggurat, a tower like they did in Genesis 11 and replace God.

It's a power play, as the postmodernists often say. It's a power play, and it's true of all of us. And that's what Paul's saying here. Finally, and briefly, where is it?

[30 : 02] Where is God's wrath? Now the key thing to see here is that in verse 18, it's more present tense than you can even see here in the ESV.

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven. Well, it's even more than, it's the wrath of God literally is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness. Which means that the wrath of God is being revealed right now.

Right now. And so where is it being revealed? And the answer to that is, look, Paul's saying, you can look out at nature, look out at the created order, and you can see the attributes of God on display.

And if you had truly the eyes to see, you could see God clearly in all of His works in the natural world, in the created order. You can see His power, you can see His divinity, all these things. But when you look out at the natural world, you don't just see God's attributes on display, you see more than that. You see something in addition to that. What do you see?

[31 : 10] Well, you see hurricanes and tornadoes and whirlpools and droughts and tsunamis, and you see water moccasins and coral snakes.

Those are poisonous, by the way. You see the law of the jungle, right? Just watch a Disney movie. You see the law of the jungle. Just look all around you.

You see broken competition, broken relationships, struggles at work. You see cancer. You see death.

Where is the wrath of God revealed? Well, it's not just that you look out at nature and see the attributes of God. You look out at nature and see the wrath of God. It's all around us. If you don't see it, you're not alive. We all feel it.

We experience it. We know it. It pushes against us all the time, every morning, when we get up and it's so hard. That is the wrath of God that is always being revealed.

[32 : 05] We know that because Genesis 3, this world that we live in, which has the law of the jungle at its heart in some ways, is based off the curse of Genesis 3.

That curse had three or four elements to it. The first was that God cursed the ground, literally. He cursed the natural world. That's the punishment of God for sin revealed.

He cursed the natural world. That means that everything we do in relationship to the world fights against us. It pushes back. It's not as bad as it could be, but it's not good.

Then he cursed the relationship between husband and wife, that they would be at enmity. It's that they would struggle with power over one another in a bad way.

Our relationships are broken. That's the wrath of God revealed. He says, childbearing the natural processes of bringing humans into this world, it's broken. It's the wrath of God revealed.

[33 : 07] He said that it all ends in banishment from His presence and death. That's the wrath of God revealed. Just listen to Herman Bovink on the wrath of God today, just as we begin to close.

Sin for us today means separation from God in each of our lives. It means darkness and ignorance and error and deception and fear and disquietude and a sense of guilt.

Have you ever felt any of these? Regret, misery, enslavement. It means even the dominion of Satan that God gave the territory of this world to Satan and his powers, John 12, 31 says, because of human sin, this is today the very wrath of God revealed.

Now to close, the main point. The main point of the text is in one little preposition, the first word of verse 18, four.

Paul has said this little word four six times already in the past five or six verses. And the reason he's doing that is because he started an argument back in 14 and 15.

[34 : 24] I'm eager to preach the gospel to you. Four, four, there it is. It's the power unto salvation. Well, what do you mean, Paul? Well, four, he says again.

It's the righteousness of God revealed. And then you see somebody's asking why, but why? And now he's saying four, the wrath of God.

You see, it's not in your English Bible, it's separated by a new column and a title, but it's all one argument. And what he's saying is when I say four, the wrath of God is revealed against ungodliness.

What I'm saying to you is the reason, the answer, the explanation of verse 16 and 17, why the gospel has been revealed.

In other words, there's no such thing as salvation unless you need to be saved from something. And his answer is four, the wrath of God is revealed to all of you.

[35 : 26] In other words, it brings us back to the same conclusion that we drew last week. Now before we draw it in the last just couple of minutes here, you need to know, you need to know, you need to know this, that there has never in all of history, never, not yet, in all of history, never has God expressed the full weight of his wrath in his holy justice against a single sinful human being.

Not once, he's never done it, not yet. And we learned that from Romans 12. He says, I am storing the full weight of wrath.

It has not been expressed yet until the final day, a day out in the future. In Genesis 2, God said, if you sin against me, if you rebel against me, you will, he repeats the verb, you will die, you will die.

That's called in the theological world, the fullness of death. And when Adam and Eve did it, they didn't get the fullness of death. They got, all they got was curse.

And every one of those curses was there to extend their life so that they could be permitted, so that it would be possible to be redeemed. See, in other words, Bob, again, he talks about the double character of God.

[36 : 53] God is not willy-nilly, that's not what he means, but that in every single expression of God's wrath in this world, it has always been simultaneously compassionate, prolonging the days of human life, not giving them full death that they deserved.

God has never, never, meted out the full weight of justice, except for once, except for once. And that's why he's connecting verse 18 to verse 16 and 17.

The wrath of God is revealed, not only to you. The wrath of God was revealed in its fullness only once, and that was put on the back of the Son of God himself, only once in all of history so far. He the Son of Man got the full weight of God's wrath so that you could get the full gift of his righteousness. That was the point of the Gospel in verse 16 and 17, it's the same point he's making right here, only once.

Look, the point is this, he has been so kind, he has been so kind since the very beginning to withhold his justice so that we might have hope.

[38 : 12] And in the middle of history, he gave us an answer. And every single human being stands before the end of time, looking down the barrel at some future moment when God will extinguish the full weight of his wrath and what he's saying to all of you here.

All of you who face that reality, all of you, and everyone does, is that all you have to do is believe in the Son of Man and that wrath will be pronounced satisfied for you.

You won't face it, you won't face it. So you can believe and you can rest. And that's the point of Paul's passage here on the wrath of God.

Let's pray. Father, we ask, Lord, that for some of us we would believe and rest for the first time that we know that our guilt is transferred in faith to the only man who's ever received the full weight of justice.

And so we ask for this help to believe in Christ's name. Amen.