

A WORLD WITHOUT FAITH

Romans 1:18-32

Key Verse: 1:18

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ...”

Last week, we learned that a sinner can be made right with God only by faith in Jesus. The righteous will live by faith. Paul said, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile”* (16). Everyone needs the grace of salvation, because everyone is a sinner. Both the Jew and the Gentile are in need of salvation.

Beginning from today’s passage, St. Paul describes the problems of two groups of people in the world—the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews represent those who were blessed with God’s word as his chosen people. The Gentiles did not have the Bible. God’s plan was to bless his chosen people to be a kingdom of priests who could share the word of God with the Gentiles. This plan did not work out because the Jews rejected God’s purpose for them. Anyway, Paul’s point is that both the Jews and the Gentiles need Jesus for salvation. In today’s passage, Paul describes the spiritual reality of the Gentiles who outright rejected God. Next week, he will address the problem of the Jews. As we study today’s passage, let us pray that God may give us a broken shepherd’s heart for those who reject the truth and are under God’s wrath.

I. GOD’S WRATH AGAINST SINFUL HUMANITY (18-20)

Look at verse 18. *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,...* Just as the righteousness from God is revealed in the gospel, so the wrath of God is being revealed against those who are wicked. Our God is merciful and loving, but he is also a righteous God. We must have a balanced view of God. He does not look at the wickedness of people and say, “It’s no big deal. Don’t worry about it.” No. Our God is a righteous God. Paul says that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people. God is angry. He is very angry. But we must understand that God’s wrath is different from our anger. God is not like an emotional person who blows up at others because he is having a bad day. God’s anger is rooted in his righteousness. The wrath of God is a fierce anger against evil. Notice that God’s wrath is being revealed not against people, but against the godlessness and wickedness of people. It is true—God hates sin but loves the sinner. So let us erase the image of God from our minds that he enjoys some sadistic joy of punishing people. We learn time and again from our Bible studies that God’s punishment is redemptive, meaning, he punishes people to help them to turn around from their wickedness. At the same time, we should remember that God is a God of righteous judgment.

So why is God angry against the godlessness and wickedness of people? What does it mean to be godless? To be wicked? To be godless is to live without God. To be wicked is

also to live without God. Paul says that the wicked people suppress the truth by their wickedness. What does this mean? What truth do they suppress and why is it so wicked? Verses 19, 20 and 25 give us a clue. They suppress the truth about the existence of God. They deny the Creator God who is the source of their lives. They do not acknowledge God's presence in their daily life.

Now you may ask "What is so wicked about that?" Beheading an innocent person and posting a video of it online, that is wicked. Punching a woman unconscious in the elevator, that is wicked. Dumping toxic waste into a stream, that is wicked. But ignoring God? Yes, the Bible teaches us that that is wicked. This is what we learn in Genesis 6: God saw "how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth" that he decided to wipe out the mankind with a great flood. What did they do? Did they murder and rob each other daily? Well, this is how Jesus described their wickedness in Luke 17. "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all" (Lk 17:26-27). God also destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness. What did they do? This is what Jesus said. "It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all (Lk 17:28-29).

Eating and drinking and marrying. Buying and selling. Planting and building. What is so wicked about them? After all, we all do these things. The point is that they were wicked because they lived their lives ignoring God the Creator. They suppressed the truth about the existence of God. They were like some people today who claim that they would be fine without God. They even say that humanity would be better off without God. The wrath of God is being revealed against their wickedness.

Now some people who hear about the wrath of God may ask: "What? God is angry with me because I ignore him? But I didn't even know that he existed! How would I know if he was there?" They are like some drivers who tell the state trooper, "Officer, I didn't know that the speed limit is 65 mph." Pleading ignorance does not work. What is Paul's answer to them? 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 people are without excuse."*

Paul says God has made himself known to mankind. People living in a remote jungle would not know about Jesus and what he has done to save them (that is why we must preach the gospel to them). But even they can know God. Since his creation, God has revealed his invisible qualities for all of us to see so that people are without excuse. The Bible says that anyone who seeks God with all his heart will find him (Jer 29:13). Anyone with an open mind can see his eternal power and divine nature by just looking at majestic mountains, lilies of the field, and the mesmerizing eyes of a baby. That is why even some prominent scientists believe in God, even though they know all the details of the theory of evolution. Astronaut John Glenn said, "To look out at this kind of

creation and not believe in God is to me impossible.” To deny God is like covering the eyes with hands and say there is no sky.

I saw a bumper sticker that said: “If God isn’t a Penn State fan, why is the sky blue and white?” This is a self-centered way of looking at the blue sky. Still, it tells that people think of God when they see the blue sky. In the beginning God created mankind in his own image. Therefore, it is in our innate nature to know God and seek him, just as an infant knows how to drink the milk from its mother. People say that they would be fine without God. But the truth is that we are not fine apart from our Creator. Rather, we become like fish out of water or sheep without a shepherd.

II. THEIR FOOLISH HEARTS WERE DARKENED (21-32)

Paul continues to teach us how the sinful humanity without God become progressively worse, not better, as some intellectuals claim.

First, the root of sin (21). Look at verse 21. *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.* God created the universe. He created humans as the culmination of his creation. He created man and woman in his own image. And he was very happy about that. He loved them and wanted them to be happy in him and with him. Sadly, the humans he created did not glorify him as God nor gave thanks to him. Instead, they rebelled against him. The root of all sin is pride and ingratitude. It happened early in human history. Sin entered the world because of their pride and ingratitude. Ever since then, we are under curse. People still say, “I don’t need God. I am fine without him.” But we are not fine without God. Paul says that when people neither glorified God as God nor gave thanks to him, their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. They did not become better. They became worse without God. We should know this. My life cannot be better without God.

Second, foolish exchanges (22-27). Paul gives some examples of how people who reject God become foolish, although they claim to be wise. A fool is one who does not trade well, exchanging something good with something bad. Paul says that foolish people without God make three foolish exchanges. (a) *They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles (23).* (b) *They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator (25).* This is true. Instead of worshiping their Creator God who is eternal, people worship all kinds of objects as their idols. Not only that, they worship money, power, fame, and even some Hollywood movie stars as their idols. It is foolish. (c) They also exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones (26-27). Both men and women abandoned natural relations and were inflamed with homosexual lusts. Paul calls their behavior “shameful acts.” I believe this is offensive to God, just as any sexual sin is offensive to him, because it destroys the family, a building block that God created for our happiness. To many of them, sex is merely a way to enjoy physical pleasure. Now some young people may no longer consider adultery and homosexuality as shameful acts in this day and age, calling them alternative lifestyle. But we have to be careful. God made it clear that they are sins. His

words have not changed, even as our society has changed. To think that we can rewrite the law of God according a social trend is to reject God as God.

Third, God gave them over (23-28). What did God do when he saw his beloved humans rejected him to worship worthless idols and engage in sinful activities? The phrase “God gave them over” is repeated three times here. *God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity* (24). *God gave them over to shameful lusts* (26). *God gave them over to a depraved mind* (28). What does this mean? Did God abandon the sinful humanity because they abandoned him? The truth is that God’s love for us is deeper than that. God saw the sinful humanity’s deliberate rejection of him and his truth. Notice the words that precede “God gave them over”—“Therefore” (24); “Because of this” (26); and “Since they did not” (28). They persisted in their evil ways. So God gave them over to their sinful ways of life. He allowed them to go their ways in the hope that they would come back to their senses on their own. This reminds us of what the father did in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. In the story, the younger son wanted to take his share of inheritance to go to a foreign country to enjoy his life apart from his father. The father knew what would happen to his beloved son. He knew that his son would suffer in a faraway country without his love and protection. Still, the father gave him the money and let him go his way. And from day 1, he waited eagerly at the gate for his son’s safe return. This father is a picture of our God who allows sinners to go their own ways. In their foolishness, people want to be far away from God, trying to enjoy the independent life from him, ignoring him and rebelling against him. They don’t know how much God loves them. They don’t know how God is waiting for their return.

Fourth, what a godless society is like (29-32). Finally in verses 29-31, Paul compiles a list of sins that people commit when they live apart from God: *They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.* I don’t think Paul meant this to be a comprehensive list of all possible sins. He says people invent ways of doing evil (30). That is true. People are still inventing ways to sin. We can think of many modern-day sins to add to the list, such as insurance fraud, social media bullying, identity theft ... to name a few. The point is that the world does not become better without God. It becomes progressively worse. Paul says in verse 32. *Although they know God’s righteous decree 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.* When we commit a sin first time, we usually feel guilty about it, because of the God-given conscience. For example, when we lie to someone first time, we feel a tinge of guilt. But we tend to suppress the guilty feeling and commit the sin again. After a while, we become numb to the guilty feeling. We commit the same sin again and again. So we continue to sin. Not only that, just as Eve wanted Adam to be her accomplice, we want other people to join in our sinful acts, because it feels better if others do the bad things as well. That is what the sinful people do. And the wrath of God is being revealed against them.

In conclusion, a world without God is not a utopia as some people have us believe. People claim to be wise, but when they live with God they do foolish things like exchanging good for evil, doing things to hurt themselves and their families. The wrath of God is being revealed against the wickedness of people who suppress the truth of God. But the real reason why Paul describes the condition of the sinful humanity is this: He wants us to know that we sinners desperately need the gospel that brings salvation to everyone who believes in Jesus.