

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

by Richard C. Halverson

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Chapter Three -

The Wrath of GOD (Romans 1:18-32)

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18).

"Speak to me of the love of GOD - not His wrath," said one man. "I can understand a GOD of love, but a GOD of wrath is meaningless." He did not understand a GOD of love because love is meaningless without wrath. Integrity implies order which, if broken, brings destructive consequences. The father who does not discipline a child does not love that child in the right way; he indulges him, and that indulgence can destroy the child.

The term "wrath of GOD" in the Bible does not mean that GOD is an arbitrary, capricious, small, jealous being who at a whim has set up petty rules to regiment human nature and who loses his temper when his rules are broken and then tries to get even with the transgressor. The term "wrath of GOD" implies an orderly GOD who has created an orderly world. We know when the tide comes in and goes out, the precise moment of the sitting and the setting of the sun. We live in a predictable universe. We know that if we step off a high building, we shall fall; but the very force which makes us fall holds us to the earth and keeps us from being flung into space as the earth turns on its axis. It is an orderly world.

Dr. Werner Von Braun, speaking at Wheaton College, was asked this question, "Is it consistent with Christian faith to probe into space - is this not contrary to our religion?" Dr. Von Braun did not believe that it was, rather that GOD had given man a mind and curiosity and that He intended that man explore creation in order to learn about it and obey it. He said, "If GOD does not want man to get to the moon, all He need do is confuse man just a little bit." The implication was clear. Because we live in an orderly universe, as science discovers the laws by which it operates and obeys those laws, we can expect to get to the moon. If we disobey them, the consequences are obvious.

We live in an orderly physical universe, which is a blessing to man. It assures him a measure of peace and harmony and security. It is a dependable world which makes progress possible. The scientific method is dependent on this order. When man fails to cooperate with GOD's order, he suffers.

- "Break the law of architecture, the building collapses.
- Break the law of agriculture, the crop fails.
- Break the laws of health, the body suffers."

This is the operation of the wrath of GOD in the universe. Not only is the universe orderly in the physical sense, it has moral and spiritual as well.

J.A. Frost, the great historian, said, "One lesson, and one lesson only, history may be said to repeat with distinctness that the world is built somehow on moral foundations; that in the long run it is well with the good, and in the long run it is ill with the wicked." "The wrath of GOD is the inevitable punishment of sin. It is built into the very structure of the universe" (James M. Stifler on Romans).

In Romans 1:18-32 Paul sets forth the revelation of GOD's wrath against the sin of man. This is the Divine explanation for man's dilemma in history. ***Here is GOD's diagnosis of the very problem we face in our modern, mid-twentieth century world.***

Man's unrighteousness is expressed in two aspects: one is suppression of the truth; the other is rejection of GOD. Notice, for example, in verse 18, "**the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.**" The meaning of the phrase "**hold the truth in unrighteousness**" means to "hold down, or suppress the truth", and in verses 21 and 28, "**Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful.**"

Much could be said on that little phrase "**neither were thankful.**" Thanklessness is godlessness. According to a report recently made, the average per capita giving to overseas work in 1960 was \$2.35. Think of it! In our prosperous America - the giving per capita for a member is less than a penny a day to missions. The offering plates are passed and men drop in a quarter or a half dollar or a dollar bill in much the same spirit as they used to flip dimes on the stage for a performer. Utterly indifferent to the mercy of GOD on our nation, thankless. Why, men waste \$2.35 nearly every week of their lives. GOD pity us. "**when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful.**" Verse 28, "**. . . they did not like to retain God in their knowledge . . .**"

In verses 18 through 20, Paul makes it clear that GOD has made Himself known from the beginning of creation; so that wherever men reject GOD and serve idols, they do so in spite of GOD's revelation of Himself, in spite of the fact that GOD has made Himself known. Paul insists that wherever men are idolatrous they are without excuse. ***Occasionally someone will ask about an aboriginal people deep in the interior in a primitive area of a continent. They have never had any opportunity to hear the truth; they have never had any light.***

The Bible says "**From the creation,**" GOD made Himself known so that they are without excuse. The Psalmist writes:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. (Psalm 19:1-3).

Wherever men worship idols, they do so in spite of GOD's revelation of Himself in nature, and in conscience. **"Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them"** (Romans 1:19). GOD Himself has done it. Therefore, the idea of religious evolution is incorrect. ***Religion has not evolved from primitive animism*** (The belief that all natural objects possess souls - *American College Dictionary*) **and polytheism** (Belief in many gods) **to a refined monotheism** (Belief in one true GOD). The opposite is true; humanity has degenerated from belief in the true GOD to the primitive religions. **"For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen,"** says the apostle Paul. Therefore man, all men, are without excuse. ***They have suppressed the truth and they have rejected GOD. That is the essence of sin.***

Basic to Paul's treatment is the distinction between the root of sin and its fruit. We are inclined to think of sins in terms of the fruit, in terms of conduct, in terms of the deed, rather than the attitude which produces the deed, the root which produces the fruit. Sin is not robbing a bank nor committing adultery, nor lying nor stealing; these are the evil results of sin. ***These are the sins born of sin. Sin is to reject GOD and suppress the truth. Sin's way is rebellion against GOD and against GOD's universe. Sin's way is the way of insubordination. Sin in the original, essential sense is man's declaration of independence from GOD.***

Some father is reading this who would not tolerate for a moment insubordination in his son. He would not tolerate for a moment anarchy in his home, yet he is insubordinate to his heavenly FATHER and a spiritual anarchist because he will not be ruled by GOD. Perhaps he is not militant in this anarchy and insubordination; he may be quite respectable in it; his rebellion is expressed by simple indifference. Though he believes in GOD, GOD really is not very important, practically speaking, in his life. This is sin's root.

Now what are the consequences of this? Or, in other words, what is the nature of GOD's wrath which is revealed against this? Here, too, there are two aspects though they may compose a distinction with a real difference - consequences and judgment. What are the consequences of disobedience or rebellion; what is the nature of the wrath of GOD as it opposes unrighteousness? First, **there is intellectual darkness.** Obviously, if a man rejects light, he is condemned to darkness by choice. Paul says in verses 21 and 22, **"Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools."** "Intellectual revolt against what a man knows to be right is always attended by the darkening of the whole understanding. Refusal to accept the truth of GOD destroys the power to discriminate between truth and error."

Perhaps most of us have had the experience in our childhood or early youth of fabricating a story which we have told so often to so many people that we do not remember whether it really happened, whether it began as the truth or a lie. We have come to believe it ourselves, and yet deep down inside we are quite sure it never happened.

Here is a news release datelined London, reporting on Radio Moscow's declaration that:

Jesus Christ never existed and Christmas is a capitalist plot to keep the working people in chains.

"The image of the supposed founder of Christianity" the Home Service Russian language broadcast asserted, "is purely legendary and mythical. Science long ago established that Jesus Christ never existed."

Now the tragic fact is that the Russians really believe that. They are absolutely sincere. Their minds are blinded because they have suppressed the truth and they believe a lie. This was true of Hitler. It was true of Mussolini. Hitler's propagandistic principle was basic - simply tell a lie often enough and people will believe it.

The second consequence is idolatry,

"And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen" (verses 23-25).

My schooling and youth came between two World Wars, and during that period of time there were engraved upon the facade of many libraries, philosophy and science building on many campuses of the world these words, "Man is the measure of things." Man was his own god. There is nothing man cannot do, not a problem in history which given time man cannot solve. That was the great age of humanism. Then came World War II, nuclear fission, Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and the shallow, optimistic confidence in human nature was blasted, leaving a terrible vacuum. ***Having rejected GOD - JESUS CHRIST - and believing in the god, man, what was there to believe in now?***

In the *Saturday Review* there was a story of Otto Molden, who more than any other single individual has dedicated himself to the formation of a United States of Europe. He established in a little Tyrolean village a seminar each summer to which more than thirteen thousand people have come since 1945 to discuss the rejuvenation of the intellectual life of Europe. Otto Molden told of a young German who as a boy had learned the Horst Wessel Song and subsequently was taught that the root of all evil is militarism. Now he is waiting to be drafted into the army! "Result?" said Molden; "He is utterly cynical and he believes in nothing."

A young chemistry professor, teaching at the University of Tokyo, said, "I have been away from Japan only two years, yet upon my return I find the students utterly different from those I knew when I left. They believe in nothing. When I am dogmatic about chemistry, they rebel and will not accept it. They believe in nothing. The world of Asia and Africa and Europe, not to mention America, is filled with a generation - millions of youth - who believe in nothing."

Someone recently told me about a young woman, a Colombian, who is teaching on a certain university campus on the East Coast where she bears a living witness for JESUS CHRIST. She was called in by the Dean of Women who said, "Now look, my dear, you know you don't have any right to propagate your faith on this campus." The Dean continued to talk to this young woman for twenty minutes about the law concerning religion in public schools; and when she was through, this very wise Christian said, "But you have been witnessing to me about your faith for twenty minutes." It is all right for a schoolteacher or a professor to ridicule

Christianity, but let nothing be said in its favor; this is against the law! This is the wrath of GOD working out in history because we would not take GOD seriously.

Jeremiah in his prophecy, 2:5, reminds us that man is incurably religious; he must have some kind of GOD, and he becomes like the god he worships. If man will not follow the true GOD, he must find a substitute; he must have an idol, and he grows into the image of the god or the idol he serves. Thus Paul says, verse 23, "**And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.**" If these are the gods of people, and they are, then there is no mystery to Paul's description of the degeneration of human personality in the rest of the chapter. ***Man becomes like his god; this is inescapable and inevitable.***

- Is your god money? You become hard and metallic and crass. You clank through life if money is your god!
- Is power your god? You become like a beast - thoughtless, ruthless.
- Is popularity your god? You become giddy and shallow and empty.

Every man must have some kind of a god. If he will not have the true god, he will have a substitute; and he becomes like his god.

Strictly speaking, even the atheist has a god. He believes in No-god! He has faith in No-god with a capital "N." There is the god of Nihilism. The god of the hollow soul, the god of the empty life, the god of purposeless and goallessness and aimlessness and wretchedness in life.

You believe in nothing, you become nothing!

The second aspect of the wrath of GOD is judgment, and judgment is summed up in four words, "**God gave them up.**" Ponder these words well. This is not a careless casting aside of a loved one but reluctant capitulation to man's freedom which GOD Himself guaranteed in creation. He is like a father sadly, unwillingly yielding to a son who insists on his own way. Having done all that he could to appeal to the son, the father knows he must finally let the son have his freedom with its consequences. Love works this way too. Many fathers have had to let sons go because they loved them. And many sons have to go to the end of the line like the prodigal before they understand this love of the father and return.

To the prophets of the Old Testament the judgment of GOD was continually active in history, but it was cumulative and came to its apex, to its consummation on what they called "**the Day of the Lord.**"

What of our day with all our knowledge and sophistication? Juvenile delinquency, crime, mental illness, alcoholism, divorce, drug addiction, sex perversion - all are increasing at a rate exceeding the population growth. GOD gave His people up! He let them have their way! This is what you want to do - do it!

- He gave them up to lust;
- He gave them up to impurity of heart;
- He gave them up to vile passions.

- He gave them up to inordinate affection, perversion, homosexuality;
- He gave them up to reprobate minds.

Beginning at the 28th verse, Paul reviews the long, loathsome log of filth, culminating in the ultimate statement of the wrath and judgment of GOD upon human personality: **"Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them"** (Romans 1:32).

Not only do people do these things, but they are actually entertained by watching others do them. It would be unfit to print some of the things that I saw as a bellhop in a commercial hotel when I was in my teens. It is not uncommon in certain areas of any modern city in America to be confronted by a sly, serpent-like, side-glancing little guy, who holds out a picture unbelievably indecent and invites you to a little private show. And there many respectable American citizens who go to the little private show, especially when they are away from home. These persons are not all on skid-row either; some come from the nice big office buildings, from behind mahogany desks. Entertained by filth! This is the wrath of GOD. Men's minds may become so reprobate that they actually take pleasure in viewing perversion in others.

Now, as a matter of fact, Rome was exactly as Paul describes it in this passage. The writers of Rome in that era, in fact, indict their own times far worse than Paul has here in his letter - of the first fifteen emperors of Rome, fourteen were homosexuals. It was a day of unprecedented, indescribable brutality, and yet it was the day of a great civilization. Some of you have ridden over the very cobblestones where the Apostle Paul set his feet on the Appian Way; you have looked at the Forum, the ruins of which still stand, the Coliseum, the aqueducts, and you have marveled at this civilization of two thousand years ago.

But do you remember, when you marvel at this civilization, that the floors of the amphitheaters ran red with the blood of Christian martyrs? Do you remember that a man could be famous if he invented a more brutal way to dispose of human life! If a man did not like what his slave did, he could destroy him on the spot. If parents did not like a child, if they did not wish to keep a newborn infant, they could throw it out! Literally! One historian says that not a day went by in those times in Rome when there were not thirty or forty babies thrown out in the streets unwanted!

Significantly, one thing which characterized this amazing civilization was religious tolerance! The Romans tolerated any god for the sake of peace in the empire. Beware when religious tolerance becomes a justification for religious indifference and rejection of GOD.

Sin begets sin; this is the wrath of GOD. The more a man sins, the easier it is to sin until he does not even know that he is sinning any more. "I want my own way." "I do as I please." You may! You may jump off the Empire State Building too if you please. There is the story of the man who did; and as he passed the twentieth floor on his way down, he was heard to remark, "Well nothing's happened yet!"

There are men today who are on their way to skid-row as surely as if they were already there - still living in nice homes. They are on their way; it is just a question of time. You stand beside a man on skid-row and he stinks; he swarms with lice, and he is not even conscious of it. He does not smell himself. You can get used to anything. Your soul can get so used to smut, it never

bothers you just as your body can get used to dirt. ***That is the wrath of GOD, inexorably operative.***

GOD does all in His power to love and lead men, but He will not coerce because love is not coercive. If man insists on his own way ("**All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all**") (Isaiah 53:6), GOD will finally capitulate to that man's insubordination and anarchy. Reluctantly, but He will. GOD's wrath may be summed up simply in this way - man left to himself, no restraints, no inhibitions. Indulge his lust over and over again, more and more, without restraint, endlessly. ***That is hell!*** Just man left to himself to satisfy his appetites, increasing, monotonous, unending boredom and exhaustion. ***That is the wrath of GOD.***

If you insist on having your way, as much as GOD loves you, He finally must give in to your choices.

We were studying Romans 1 some years ago in a doctor's home in Hollywood with a number of other doctors and their wives present. Among them was a fine young M.D. who had a great reputation in Southern California, a brilliant man and a graduate of John Hopkins Medical College. When we finished Romans 1 that night and opened the discussion for questions, this doctor spoke up saying, "I don't ever remember reading the Bible, but tonight I have seen myself in Romans 1; now what do I do about it?"

I said, "That's the wonderful thing about the Gospel. The blood of JESUS CHRIST, GOD's Son, cleanses from all sin." Though a man has decided he wants his own way and follows his own course, at any moment if he will ask, GOD will lovingly intervene and cleanse him and forgive him and restore him. This is the Gospel, and it is for everybody!

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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