Romans 1:18-32 - How we know God is angry with the world.

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[0:00] Our reading is from Romans chapter 1 verse 18 to the end.! The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

! 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.
God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.
Amen! They exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve created things rather than the creator who is forever praised.
Amen! And there are holy holy holy

They're both there in verse 18. Look down at verse 18. Here then are the two claims of our passage.
Number one, it should be obvious to us that God is angry with the state of the world. That's the first one. That's what it means by the phrase, God's wrath is revealed.
His wrath is his settled opposition. We don't need to think of it as a kind of our anger that just kind of flares up in a moment. We get irritated with others. It's not like that.
It is his holy and just opposition to all that is evil, his wrath, his judgment. And Paul says his judgment against sin is not hidden. It is revealed. It's obvious. It's visible. We can see it.
[5:09] That's the first claim. The second claim is that the big problem in the world is not that people don't know God, but that they don't want to know him.

That's the claim. We're told as we were looking at with the children, we suppress the truth. That is, we squash it down. We deliberately ignore it. Like as we were saying, the small child with their fingers in their ears and their eyes closed saying, I can't hear you. I don't know what you're saying. It's not ignorance. It's willful rejection. And that, says our passage, is what humanity does. We suppress the truth by our wickedness. Now, those two claims, the obvious anger of God and the suppression of the truth about God, those are the big ideas which basically dominate the rest of the chapter that was read to us.
So we're just going to consider them in more detail, and hopefully the passage will open up in front of us as we do. We're going to start with the suppression of the truth, which I think is a bit more straightforward. It's there in verses 19 to 23.
And then we'll think about the visible wrath of God. So let's start with the suppression of the truth. Look down in your Bibles and notice with me all the seeing or knowing type words in these verses.
[6:20] Verse 19. What may be known about God is plain to them. Later on in the same verse, God made it plain to them. Verse 20.

Things have been clearly seen and been understood. Verse 21. We're told they knew God. Paul's point, then, is that there is something so obviously true in the universe that it is known and seen by everyone.
And what is it? Look down at verse 19. What may be known about God is plain. God has made it plain. And then in verse 20, you get more detail. It is the eternal power and divine nature of God that have been clearly seen.
Everybody can see God's power and his divine nature. Imagine it like this with me for a moment. Imagine that you are pulled over by the police for running the red light at the junction between Salisbury Road and Harvest Road.
And the police officer stops you in the car. You've sailed through the red light. And the police officer pulls you over and says, sir, did you not see the red traffic light? And you turn to him and say, what red traffic light?
[7:35] I didn't see a red traffic light. And the police officer is a bit surprised because the traffic lights aren't kind of hidden. They're kind of prominent. They're there by the side of the road. They've got lights on them. And so you can see them. And so the police officer says, well, what about the warning signs that came before the traffic lights?

Did you see any of those warning signs? No. No, I didn't see a single one. And then even more puzzled. They say, well, what about the fact that the car in front of you stopped at the red light and you had to go round him in order to jump the red light?
Did you notice that? Oh, no, I never noticed. Never saw the car. What about the fact that I, in my police car, was alongside of you at the red light, pointing to the light all the time?
Did you notice? No, no, I never saw you. Well, what about the fact that your driving license says you live just around the corner and you must pass this junction every single day?
You must at some point have noticed there were traffic lights at this junction because you were here all the time. I've never noticed them before. Never seen them in my life. But what about the fact that your father was a road builder and he put these lights in the ground and told you about them as you were growing up?
[8:52] Oh, no, I don't remember that at all. Well, what does the police officer conclude? It's obvious, isn't it? You're lying. You are suppressing the truth.

You know full well that the lights are there. You're just faking it. And this is the key, right? Why are you faking it? Why? Well, because you hope to get away with jumping the red light.

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That's why, right? You have a vested interest in the lights not being there. Because if the lights aren't there, it doesn't matter that you jump them. And Paul says that's exactly what we're like with the existence of God. His power and his nature are clear.
They've been clearly seen in what he has made. You know, did these mountains make themselves? Of course they didn't make themselves. Did this moral conscience that I have, did that evolve in me from nowhere? No, of course it didn't.
Is this perfectly balanced universe that supports sophisticated life come about by chance? Did order come out of chaos? Did everything come from nothing? Of course not. It is self-evident. But we deny it.
[9:51] And according to verse 21, we neither glorify him as God nor give thanks to him. Instead, we become futile and foolish. We run the red lights of the universe, hoping that that means that we can live as we please.

We have a vested interest. There's more detail to this though as well, isn't there? Look down at verse 22. Notice Paul tells us here how humanity do this. Here it is.
We deny the God that we should worship. We deny him the worship that we know he deserves. And we do this all the time while claiming to be wise. And what is it that we do in our great wisdom? We worship other things. Things that we've made up. Things that are part of creation or things that we have made ourselves. So our suppression of the truth is really, if you like, a trade of the truth. We deny God and we swap him out for someone or something else. Something that we can control. Something that we are in charge of. Something that we call God but is really an idol.
[11:08] Go back to the traffic light illustration for a moment. And the conversation with the police officer is carrying on. And you turn to the police officer and you say, I can see it in your eyes, Mr. Police Officer. I know that you think that I'm one of those terrible traffic light deniers.

But I want you to know that I am not a traffic light atheist. Please don't put that stamp on me. I'm not that kind of person. I have here in my car a set of traffic lights.
I have made them myself and I obey them all the time. I've got a little button here on my dashboard. When I press it, that light there, it turns red and I always stop. Whenever it does it.
You know, I do believe in traffic lights. Just these ones that are inside my car that I've made and that I control with this little button here. It's those sort of big outside of me lights that I'm not really very keen on.
What does the officer say then? Well, I mean, they must conclude by now that you've gone mad. But you've gone mad with a particular kind of madness, haven't you? You've gone mad with this truth-swapping kind of madness.
[12:15] You see, it's obvious, isn't it? If you didn't know that traffic lights existed, how could you possibly have made a set for the inside of your car? Right?

The very fact that you have some in your car means that you know that objective traffic lights outside of your car, they exist. Because there's a copy of them inside your car.
And so it is here. You know, we don't deny his existence by pretending there's no morality, no way to live, no good. Rather, we replace God by pretending that we design those things.
And the fact that we design something that we worship as God means that we know deep down in our hearts that the God who is there is there. Because we've copied him in an idol.
The very existence of the idol and our need for it shows that deep down we know that we were made for a God who really does exist. Think about how this works. Often today, these idols are not crafted in the image of birds, animals and reptiles like they are in verse 23.
[13:17] More often than not, idolatry goes on in our minds. You know, God for us is how we think of him. You know, we feel for God rather than listen to God in his word.

And we come up with an idea of God that suits our own agenda. Normally, that is a God who is pretty easygoing about the need for repentance. Turning away from sin and turning to him isn't really the sort of thing that the God in our imagination is like.
Instead, the gods that we come up with are interested in our personal fulfillment. The God that we come up with is his highest good is to fulfill my life and my aspirations and bless my plans. He's a God who's largely silent about my addictions, my relationships, my integrity, my goals in life.
And it's not just us, is it? Notice it's the wise people who do this, according to verse 22. These are the people on our TV, the influencers on our social media feeds. These are the guys who are the best at making up gods, selling them to us in exchange for follows and likes, getting rich out of our

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desperation for a God who we can control and who does our bidding.
We even do it in dumb ways, don't we? Just like the toy traffic lights on the dashboard of the car. We swap out the powerful God, the God who is there, the God who made us, the God to whom one day we'll have to give an account.
[14:35] We swap them out for dumb things like football. So that our mood, our money, our time, our delights are more shaped around how our team is doing than they are about who God is and how he made us.

Or we swap them out for career or family or status, thinking that the great good in life is for people to respect us. For my mates at school to think that I'm awesome and brilliant.
But it's an attempt to suppress the truth. We swap God for something less because deep down we know God is real. We just want one that's under our control who does what we want.
There's a conclusion to all this, though, isn't there? We must not miss. It's there at the end of verse 20. Let me just read that to you again. 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.
The reality is the suppression of the truth doesn't really work. It leaves us without an excuse.
[15:37] Paul's point is shocking, isn't it? He says that no one's going to be able to stand before God on that final day. I didn't know. I didn't know. No one will be able to say, but I thought this was my God.

Because the truth is self-evident, and excuses just melt away in the presence of the one for whom we were made. I wonder if I can just press this gently for us this morning.
What Paul is saying here is that there is not a single person in this room, there's not an individual in our city, who has a valid reason for not living for the praise and glory of God.
There's no one that has an excuse that will stand up when they meet God. Now, I didn't know.
It won't cut it. I thought you were different. It's not going to help. I was too busy. It will not stand.
Because God has made his existence plain, so that you might seek after him and find him.
[16:39] And if you don't, you are without excuse. Because your life is littered with God replacements, each one of which show that you knew in your half-hearts that he was there all along.

That's the first claim. The problem with us is not that we don't know the truth, but that we suppress the truth. Secondly, let's look at Paul's other claim. God's anger is obvious.
Here the point is that God's wrath is not hidden, and nor is it just a future event on Judgment Day. The Bible is really clear that history is working towards a day when all of humanity will stand before God, who will stand in judgment.
But Paul's point here is that it is presently visible in the world now, revealed to us. If you look down at verse 24, you'll see that this picks up the idea. Verse 24 starts with the word therefore.
There are quite a lot of therefores, or becauses, or senses, or fors in the passage. This is the big one, right? Because this is how God responds to our suppression of the truth. We swap God for an idol, and what does God do?
[17:45] Verse 24, he gives us over. In fact, it's repeated three times. Verse 24, God gave them over. Verse 26, look down at it. God gave them over.

Verse 28, God gave them over. You could perhaps term this God's passively active judgment, whereby in a sort of positive action, he passively steps back and says, you know, okay, you deny my existence.
You swap me out for something else. See how that goes for you. See how that works out. So God withdraws. He removes his blessing. He takes us out of the garden. He puts himself behind a thick temple curtain.
And what happens when he does that? Well, exactly what you would expect to happen. Exactly what's happening around us all the time. That is that we are taken over by our own desires and our own longings.
They rule us in the place of God. And the first set of desires that get mentioned here are sexual desires. Verse 24 talks about impurity, the degrading of our bodies with one another.
[18:51] So that gone now are the God-given restraints that were built into creation, where one man was made for one woman in the institution of marriage, faithful, committed, loyal, intimate. Now instead we are pulled around by our own desires, which shift and change like the wind, leading to

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the degrading of what was made precious.

Verse 26 and 27 pick on this theme of sexual desire and carry it on, saying not only are we made by God for a faithful, committed, loyal marriage, but also that nature teaches that sex is given for the possibility of childbearing.
Childbearing. The way humanity was intended to fill and subdue the world was to exercise godly dominion over all that God had made through childbearing.
And yet having suppressed the truth about God and been handed over to our desires, that plan now goes out of the window and unnatural sexual relationships are pursued as they are desired. Men with men and women with women.
Now you don't need me to tell you that these verses are massively controversial in our time. I don't actually think there's a more provocative chapter of the Bible than this one.
[20:00] So much so that you're advised not actually to read it out in public for inciting anger and difficulty. But let me tell you something really obvious, right?

Paul's point when he wrote these verses was not to trigger 21st century Londoners who he'd never met. That isn't why he's writing, okay? It's important to notice as well that there's no suggestion here that homosexual sex is any worse than anything else.
Rather, his point is to say that the natural restraints of sexual activity that were built into the world by God have been rejected. So despite the fact that unfaithfulness ruins children, traumatizes individuals and causes pain that lasts for generations, still the committed, faithful sexual relationship of a man and a woman seems beyond us.
And we've all been hurt by that kind of pain. Desires that pull us away. And even though it should be plain that sex is designed for the possibility of childbearing in accordance with the plan of God in Genesis 1, still when sex is governed instead by our desires, we pursue even sexual relationships where they're guaranteed not to do that.
Unnatural ones, as he calls them. Now, at that level, I would say it's hard to argue that he's wrong because they have been given up, right? Sexual restraint has been given up.
[21:23] That is observably true. In fact, actually, our culture celebrates the fact that we have given up sexual restraint. The controversial thing that Paul is saying in these verses is that the giving up of those constraints that we are so proud of that we call progress is, says Paul, a sign of God's judgment on us.

It's all a part of God's handing us over that we are now driven by desire and not by pleasing God. His point is, really, that we've not been liberated by living for sexual desire, but that actually living for sexual desire is a kind of, well, tyranny.
It's a torture. You know, I think probably, as you read the passage, the material on sexual relationships jumps out at us, but it's actually not the only detail here, is it? The evidence of God handing us over to our desires is there in verse 29.
Look down. You see God's judgment in all of this as well. You see God's judgment in every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossips, slanderers.
Anybody feeling like they're not included yet? We're all here, aren't we? God-haters, insolent, arrogant, boastful. They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents.
[22:44] They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Think back to the traffic lights for a moment. It's been a stretch of our imaginations to go through this story, hasn't it?

But I'm going to just stretch it a little bit further, if I can. The conversation with the police officer carries on. And he says, you know, normally in these circumstances, I would give you a £100 fine and three points on your license for jumping that red traffic light, but because of your willfulness, I'm going to do something slightly different this time.
He says, what I'm going to do, because you deny the existence of traffic lights, I am going to remove all traffic lights from the streets of London and see how it goes.
And, you know, at first you think, wow, this is brilliant. I've got away with it. I've got away with it. And now I can drive around London as I please. And so you drive off thinking, this is absolutely incredible.
What great liberation I am enjoying. That is until you get to, well, it's the end of Carton Vale and Kilberland Lane here, and someone bumps into the back of you. You know, they thought you could go.

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[23:49] You thought you should stop. And they crash into you. You get a bit further. You go to Maida Vale. And then you're sat there because the little traffic lights on your dashboard that you've made, it says red light.

And it says it for an hour and a half. And so you're just waiting there. Not going. You get down on the Edgware Road and someone T-bones you right across the side. They break your legs. They break your arms.
Suddenly what felt like liberation is actually some kind of torture. It's a kind of judgment all of its own, isn't it? The chaos, the pain, and the disruption are a judgment.
And that, says Paul, is the world that you and I live in. A world where we are entirely free to ignore and deny the existence of God. You're entirely free to govern your life by your own desires.
But the moral chaos that follows, the unfaithfulness, the wickedness, the clash of people who are out for themselves, in for what they can get, that, says Paul, is not liberation, it's judgment. So we shout loudly, don't we, about sexual freedom.
[24:51] And then we weep bitterly when the man or woman that we love goes off with someone else. We love the idea that we can do what we want. And then we find the reality is oppressive and destructive as people violently oppose us and betray us, go behind our backs, war with one another.

But the most tragic part of all of this is there in verse 32, which is that the obvious wrath of God does not bring about a change of heart. Look down at 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. You're under the wrath of God.
In a world of chaos, you might thought that we'd all change our minds. That we'd go and hunt out the police officers and say, please reinstall the traffic lights. I believe, I believe. But no, we don't. Instead, we double down.
It's like the man in a smashed up car on Edgware Road who's just been hit by another car coming the other way, shouting liberation, freedom, broken legs and broken arms.
[25:57] Now, I know this is a difficult passage, right? This obvious wrath of God, his judgment in our world, but our suppression of the truth, it's hard, isn't it?

I really happily talk to any of you over coffee about any of the issues that have been raised this morning. You know, bring me a black coffee from over here and I'll talk to you for as long as you like. But let me just finish with two suggested responses that we should have.
The first one is this. If you've understood what we've been saying so far, you must be thinking, this is much worse than I thought. I don't know whether you've had that experience of going to the doctor for something simple and finding out you've actually got something a lot more serious.
Or you take your car to the garage because it's making a small knocking noise and then the car is in the garage for months being repaired. Well, listen, if you've been listening and following this morning, that should be your feeling.
You should be thinking, well, this is so, I've never heard anything like this. This is so much worse than I thought. And let me show you, it's worse than you thought in two ways. One is personally, right? There shouldn't be a person in this room who doesn't think that they've got problems in their life, right?
[27:05] We all know that, don't we? Perhaps you think, well, maybe if I'd attend church a little more regularly, then my problems might just go away. But the fact here is that the description of the problem is way deeper than that.

The problem is not that there are a few problems in your life. The problem is that in our heart of hearts, we deny God and have swapped him out for something we control and we are under the judgment of God.
We are subject to our own disordered desires and everyone else's. It's hard to take, but let me suggest to you, that's actually a kindness for you to hear it.
Being told the bad news by someone is really loving, right? If you don't see how bad it is, you'll go for some superficial solutions. I used to borrow my mum's car from time to time and it would make some really odd noises and she'd say, oh yes, it's been doing that for a while, but I turned the radio up and then I didn't notice it anymore.

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That is not fixing it, is it? That's ignoring it. Now listen, you can do the same in your life. You can say, oh Steve, that sounds like a terrible prescription of the problem. I don't want that.
[28:07] I'm just going to turn the music up and ignore it. But let me tell you, it's a kindness to hear. If you want to take paracetamols to try and cure cancer, then that's up to you. But if you want the real cure, you need to know the real problem.

But secondly, it's worse globally as well, isn't it? I want to just remind you that Paul is writing Romans to persuade the church in Rome to join him on his mission to Spain. And his motivation here is to tell them that they live in a world under the judgment of God.
If you're a Christian this morning, there is not a single individual that you have met that doesn't need to hear about Jesus. Because there's no one in this world with an excuse. Everyone needs to hear about him.
And listening to this and that it's worse than you perhaps first thought is motivation for us to go and tell people about Jesus. That's the first thing, it's worse than we thought. The second response is this, the solution is more wonderful than I expected.
I'm cheating here, right? Because this is the weeks to come. But because the problem is worse than we expected, what we will find in the weeks to come is that the solution is more precious and richer and fuller than we ever thought.
[29:14] You see, notice there's a twofold problem here, right? The first is this suppression of the truth that we need to repent of. And notice that we need a change of heart to do that, right? A change of heart that we are incapable of and which the wrath of God has not brought about.

Yeah? For us to be saved in Romans 1, we need to start believing in God and not suppressing the truth about him. But that requires a change of heart that is not coming about by the judgment of God.
We need something else. But the second issue is God's wrath itself. God is opposed to us. We are experiencing in part now and a promise more to come.
And so salvation not only needs to change us, it also in one sense needs to change God too. Deal with his wrath. Satisfy it. Do away with it.
In a holy, just, fair way. And that's exactly what happens in the Christian gospel. In the Christian gospel, God comes to us by his spirit and makes us alive.
[30:17] And with our very first spiritual breath, what do we say? I am sorry, Lord. I believe in you. I trust in you. I turn from myself and I turn to you.

And then in the Christian gospel, God comes in the person of the son and on the cross pays in his blood the judgment for our sin, bearing in his body the wrath of God at our sin.
God hands over to him all of our sinful desires and the judgment that that deserves that he might pay the penalty and die in our place. There's an old hymn.
Put it like this. We'll finish with this. Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee. Let the water and the blood from thy wounded side, which flowed, be of sin, the double cure.
What comes next? Save from wrath and make me pure. And that's exactly what God has done in the Lord Jesus.
[31:24] Praise him. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, with this spiritual breath that you have given us by your spirit, we want to say, Lord, we are deeply sorry.

We have suppressed the truth about who you are and we've lived for our own desires. Please have mercy on us. We thank you for the death of the Lord Jesus in our place that saves us from your wrath and makes us pure.
Please, Lord, we pray. Would you so move our hearts to love and trust you and love others that we don't shrink from telling them the good news of the Lord Jesus, that we might not be ashamed of the gospel because it is your power that brings salvation to everyone who believes.
In Jesus' name. Amen.

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