

What Makes God Angry?

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Date: 24 June 2001

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[0 : 00] does not care. If God is not angry at evil, he does not even love.

If God does not hate sin, then in the end he is not righteous. Believe in the wrath of God because God is love.

So said a fellow student when I was studying theology and he is now a bishop. Well, it's true that God is love. His love is all-loving, abounding in steadfast love indeed is he.

He loves to the thousandth generation we're told. He welcomes sinners and forgives them. His steadfast love and mercy endures forever.

And it's also true that there are many people who dismiss any notion of God being a God of wrath or anger. Wrath and love are mutually inconsistent, they say.

[1 : 03] Wrath is a primitive idea, unacceptable to modern minds. Wrath or anger diminishes God. Wrath is fickle or temperamental.

In fact, it's ungodly, some say. Wrath is a true love. Wrath is a true love. Wrath is a true love. Wrath is a true love. You see, God sits on a throne, not in a rocking chair. He loves, of course he loves. He loves to the thousandth generation. His love and mercy do endure forever. But he is consistently angry at sin and evil.

You see, wrath is not the opposite of love. Indeed, wrath is a necessary expression of love.

Because God loves, he is angry when those he loves sin and do wrong or do what is wicked.

The passage today, which is about the wrath of God, is not an easy passage. And over the years, including in current times, there are many who try to dismiss it or put it to one side or reinterpret it in ways in which it's not meant to be understood.

[2 : 14] But the most difficult thing of all about this passage is that it's about us, not about other people. So let's pray as we turn to it.

God, we thank you that you are perfectly loving. We thank you that you are righteous. We thank you that you are angry at what is evil and sinful and wrong.

We pray this morning that your word may fill our minds and hearts with truth, that it may expose our own wrongdoing and bring us back to your mercy and grace.

And we pray this for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen. Remember how we finished or Romans finished last week in verses 16 and 17.

Paul said that he was not ashamed of the gospel because in it the righteousness of God for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith because in it the righteousness of God is revealed.

[3 : 20] Why is this gospel needed? Why does God need to reveal his righteousness in the gospel? Why is Paul not ashamed of this gospel?

Well, one reason is because the wrath of God is being revealed against all the wickedness and evil in this world. notice that verse 18 where we begin today begins for, that is because.

Paul's not ashamed of the gospel because it's the power of God for salvation. It's the power of God for salvation because in it the righteousness of God is revealed and the righteousness of God is revealed because the wrath of God is currently being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

that is the gospel is needed because of human evil and wickedness or what the Bible calls sin. But not just because of that. The right, the gospel is needed not only because human sin but because God is angry at human sin.

If God were not angry at human sin then he wouldn't need the gospel. But it's because God who is righteous is angry at human sin that the gospel is needed. The essence of sin notice is the suppression of truth about God.

[4 : 40] That lies at the heart of sin. God is angry against all the ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

That is the truth about God the truth that God alone is God and God alone is to be glorified and honoured as God. That's the essence of sin. The truth that God alone is God to be glorified. Now Paul unpacks this a bit more in the next verses. In verse 19 he explains what he means. Notice again that that verse begins before that is because the reason why God is angry against such wickedness that suppresses the truth is that what can be known about God is plain to them. It's obvious to them because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature invisible though they are have been understood and seen through the things he's made.

Paul is saying there that the evidence for God's eternal power and divine nature is evident in the creation. as you ponder the beauty of the creation its intricacy its complexity its interdependence its balance there are signs there of God the creator at work his divine nature and his eternal power.

[6 : 09] Paul's not saying that everything to know about God is revealed in creation. You can't really look around the created world and understand Jesus and mercy and the cross and forgiveness but there is enough in the creation for us to understand that God is divine that is that he's God and he's sovereign and that he is eternally powerful.

That is there's enough in the creation for people to see that. The problem is not the lack of evidence there's plenty of evidence. The problem is that people refuse to accept the evidence.

It's plain Paul says in verse 19 for everyone to see but people as he said in verse 18 suppress the truth. They refuse to accept what is obvious to see in the world.

And so he says at the end of verse 20 they are without excuse. Ignorance is not an excuse. You cannot plead ignorance as you look around the world and say well I can't see where God is here. I can't see his divine nature or his eternal power. Ignorance is no excuse here. When I was in year 10 doing my final chemistry paper for the year to my shock and horror sitting down to read the paper as we started the exam realised that a whole section of questions I had no idea what it was about.

[7 : 31] I can't actually remember what topic it was but it was a topic that we had not been taught in our class that year. And so part of the paper 20% or something like that was completely outside my field of knowledge.

What I discovered afterwards was that our whole class unique of all the other classes in the school had not been taught that. The teacher for some reason had overlooked to teach us that area of chemistry that year.

In that case our ignorance was an excuse. It was not our fault that we didn't know it was the teacher's fault and I'm sure in retrospect they adjusted the marks to make allowance for that. But that's not the case here. It's the opposite of that. Our ignorance is not an excuse. God has made it plain. He's revealed himself enough in the creation for every person to acknowledge that God is divine and that he has eternal power.

Ignorance is no excuse. So Paul says at the end of verse 20 that for everybody in this world they are without excuse for suppressing the truth about God.

[8 : 40] Now he reiterates that point in another way in the next verse 21 because he says though they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him.

That is again saying that the basic sin is suppressing the truth about God. They knew God that is they ought to have known enough about God from the creation but they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him.

And there is the basic sin. Suppressing the truth about God means that you do not honour God as God you do not acknowledge or give thanks to him as God.

Now we need to pause here and remember that the aim of the gospel is that God is glorified. Yes the gospel is about God loving us to save us but if you remember back to last week the purpose of the gospel and Paul writing this letter was so that the Christians in Rome would practice the obedience of faith and that would be so as he says in verse 5 for the sake of his name for the sake of Jesus name that is that is in effect he's saying so that Jesus will be honoured and glorified. What he's saying here is the basic sin of humanity is refusing to acknowledge God as God or glorify God as God and that's why the gospel is there so that people will glorify God as God and for the sake of Jesus name glorify Jesus as God as well.

[10 : 11] The gospel is for the sake of Jesus name for the glory of God and that's where people have gone wrong so that's the basic sin that the gospel is about correcting that we will honour God as God and glorify him alone as God.

That's why God made us in the first place. You read the story of the creation of people in Genesis 1 humanity made in the image of God we understand there that there's a sense in which God has made us for his own glory not for our benefit primarily and the original sin was to dishonour God as God and so the gospel is on about bringing humanity back to honour God as God to give thanks to him and Paul is saying there's enough in the creation that every person in the world ought to be able to do that even though not everything is known about God from creation there is sufficient to see his eternal power and his divine nature so that's the basic sin suppressing the truth about God not acknowledging God as God not glorifying God as God not giving thanks to him as God if that then is the basic sin what is the result of that sin well the first thing is confused thinking Paul goes on to say in the next bit of verse 21 because they did not know though they knew God they didn't honour him as God or give thanks to him but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened claiming to be wise they became fools in effect it's three expressions for the same thing the result of not honouring God as God of suppressing the truth is that their minds were darkened they were futile in their thinking their minds were darkened and they thought they were wise but really they were fools that is they've got it out of kilter they're distorted in their way of thinking and viewing the world and themselves it's as though somehow out of a out of a unity they've taken away the truth about God and what's left is out of balance and so they think they've understood what's left they think they're wise but actually they're fools because the the truth of God has been suppressed and it's ruled out of the equation to understand life and so on Paul here is not just talking about pagans or atheists people who don't believe God exists he's talking about people in general so whether you believe God exists or not he's talking about those people and those people who construct God wrongly who think that God is like this when God is actually truly like this he's addressing those people as well they've suppressed the truth about God they may still believe there is a God they may still believe something about Jesus but they may not believe what's true about him they've suppressed the truth and so their whole world view and system of thinking is faulty and distorted they think they're wise I mean that's so often the case isn't it in our world the clever minds the people who are perhaps scientists who think they've worked out nature and so on but God's not part of the equation our world might praise them and lord them as brilliant people but because God is not part of their thinking they're actually fools but the same could be true of some Christian leaders they've suppressed the truth about God so they proclaim wrong things about God they think they're very clever and advanced we've got a retired American bishop in our country at the moment propagating such foolishness called Bishop Spong we've got a retired bishop from Scotland Bishop Holloway of Edinburgh who's also propagating nonsense non-truth about God they've suppressed the truth about God they think they're wise and clever because they've moved on from the gospel but actually in the end they're fools because they're propagating falsehood and not truth so that's the first result of suppressing the truth about God you end up being a fool and not wise your mind is distorted and in fact your mind is darkened the second thing and the result of that is idolatry so Paul says in verse 23 they exchanged the glory of their mortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles now in Paul's day people might have statues or idols that they worshipped they might be forms of humans many of the Greek and Roman gods are human statues and so on or they might even be animal type statues today in our day and age we think we're more sophisticated and we've moved on from such idolatry but indeed we haven't our world is full of idolatry but it may not be so crass as having a little statue on a mantelpiece or in a pagan temple

[15 : 03] Paul's succession there is you've exchanged the glory of God the highest being maybe for images of humans or going down a step of birds going down a step of animals even to the lowest form which is reptiles in effect that's foolishness to exchange the glory of God for the glory of some idol that you worship and he uses the language of exchange as you know a few weeks ago I was in holidays in Cambodia and when I was in the capital Phnom Penh needed to change some money and went to a money changer desk at a market in Phnom Penh and we had some Thai baht and we wanted to change that into Cambodian real and into American dollars which is the currency that you could use there and we were ripped off because we gave them perfectly good Thai baht we received a wad of Cambodian real which isn't worth very much and quite a few American dollars

but embedded in the American dollars were a couple that were torn and therefore they're invalid as tender in Cambodia you weren't allowed to offer we discovered later that afternoon when we went to buy something handed over some money no no no no cannot take this it's got a tear in it so we'd exchanged valid currency for in effect not counterfeit but invalid currency worthless currency now that's the sort of language

Paul is using here people have exchanged the worship and glory of God for something that's useless the worship and glory of idols he uses the language again in verse 25 they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator and they're fools for doing it in effect Paul is saying so then suppressing the truth about God leads to minds that are distorted and darkened it leads people into idolatry and in response to that God vents his wrath we might expect as Paul talks about the wrath of God here for him to talk in terms of a cataclysmic event a catastrophe an illness an earthquake a flood or a famine or a war some obvious sign of the intervention of God to show that he is angry at the sins of the world and humanity and from time to time

God does act in that way sort of like on Monty Python that foot that comes down to obliterate everyone with a great big splat we often think that that's God's wrath but the picture of God's wrath here is more frightening than that because God's wrath here is his non-intervention it's that God holds back and he gives up sinful world to follow its own course and that is more terrifying and more horrifying than a direct intervention by God in this world because ultimately sin and evil is destructive and God is saying in effect you've chosen to walk down that path of idolatry and foolishness and sin I will let you keep walking I'll hang back I give you up to that path and in the end it leads to death eternal there is nothing more severe than God giving up people to their sins and ways so notice how it's expressed in verse 24 therefore God gave them up verse 26 for this reason God gave them up verse 28 and since they did not see fit to acknowledge God God gave them up three times for emphasis Paul uses that expression that is the wrath of God at work God giving people up he takes human freedom seriously he doesn't stop us from doing wrong all the time if we were to exercise our freedom in a foolish way in a sinful wicked evil way suppressing the truth about God God respects our freedom often and lets us pursue that path and that is his wrath and anger at work and it is a terrifying anger indeed let me explain how in some cases it works a person may well act in a sinful way and they fear the wrath of God to come down and stop them or to punish them they fear that they might get ill or lose their job or some cataclysmic event will happen as God's anger is vented at their sinful act and they look around and they wait and nothing happens so what does a person with now a darkened and foolish mind think oh I don't think God is going to punish me or I don't think that is sin after all that must be an okay activity

God hasn't obliterated me or punished me I can do it again safely and they do and they keep doing and they keep getting hardened and more habitual into their sinful practices and God doesn't seem to act so the darkened mind that suppress the truth about God thinks God's not angry God's not judging maybe God's not even there there are many Christians who've fallen down this path and in the end God is kept out of the equation and they carry on sinful lives it's a terrifying thing when in God's anger and wrath he stands back and lets us pursue the path of our choice suppressing the truth with confused minds and idolatry leading into a road of immorality you see foolish people believe that God is not angry at sin and therefore they keep on sin and they say well

[21 : 10] God hasn't punished me and they don't see his anger at work as it's described here by St. Paul and in the end they lose their faith their faith that God judges the faith that God is righteous the faith that God is active indeed that God will punish sin that's terrifying wrath indeed darkened minds failing to see God at work God doing nothing is the worst thing that God could do see how it works then in verse 24 and 25 God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts in the lust of their hearts to impurity that is they start off with lust God stands back and so they begin to practice those lusts in all kinds of impurity a fairly general word for uncleanness impurity not just sexual immorality to the degrading of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is to be blessed forever amen the basic sin is not honouring God

God lets idolatry run its course and idolatry always leads into immorality that's what Paul is saying in verses 24 and 25 a good historical example of that I think is Germany in the 19th and early 20th centuries under the influence of Nietzsche who believed that God is dead suppressing the truth about God the influence of that sort of philosophy in the end led down the path to the immorality of

Hitler's regime and so often is that the case suppressing the truth about God leads on to idolatry which leads to immorality it's not that the immorality is the basic sin indeed in many respects the practice of immorality is a reflection that God is angry at the idolatry and suppression of truth now the patterns repeated again in verses 26 and 27 this time with content a bit more specific for this reason God gave them up to degrading passions their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural and in the same way also the men giving up natural intercourse with women were consumed with passion for one another men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error here the consequence of idolatry and not honouring God is wrong sexual activity and in specific homosexual activity now you don't need me to tell you that this is a highly contentious issue in our society and in the church a lot could be said I'll say just a couple of things relating to this passage firstly homosexual activity is just one of many sins mentioned in this chapter we'll see a whole list in a few minutes time it's not the only one it's not the only manifestation therefore of the wrath of God it's one of many Paul is talking about the activity in general not the inclination or orientation and not talking about something like homosexual abuses or violent behavior or something like that he's talking about it in general also it's right to say that modern understanding or misunderstanding of homosexual activity does not in the end put aside these verses there's no justification for saying we've now understood homosexual activity in a more sophisticated way therefore it's okay therefore these verses are outdated and wrong Paul's comment was in the environs of the world in which homosexual activity was quite condoned in many respects he was counter cultural then as he is now our society has not really moved on from the ancient

Greco-Roman society of St. Paul when Paul here talks about exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural he's talking about what is natural according to God's order of the world he's not talking about what might be natural for one person a number of people have tried to sideline this by saying well if a person is naturally homosexual then Paul is saying it's right for them to be homosexual it's wrong for them to practice heterosexual activity but if somebody is naturally heterosexual then they ought not to practice homosexual activity that's not what Paul's got in mind there was no one in the ancient world who thought in that sort of individualistic way Paul here is talking about what is natural according to God's order of society and what is natural for God is heterosexual activity not homosexual now having said that we have to then ask why does Paul single out this activity here why is this activity highlighted it's not the only sin but it is highlighted and the reason it seems that Paul highlights this here is because it is so linked to what is glory to God when God created humanity in Genesis 1 male and female he created them in the image of God he created him we read and Paul here doesn't actually use the word men and women though our translations got that he uses the words male and female rare words but words that I think deliberately allude back to Genesis 1 so what Paul is talking about here is an abuse of the original creation male and female God made them in the image of God now we find when people exchange the glory of God or we might say the image of God it's reflected in the fact that no longer is it male and female inactivity together but homosexual activity is a reflection of the exchange of the glory of God for in effect the glory of idols and that is so much of what illicit sexual activity in our world is a manifestation of idolatry not anything to the glory of God so that I think is why this is highlighted here because it is not about the glory of God it is in the end an action of idolatry and therefore an action of foolishness one final comment here sometimes Christians say well AIDS is obviously the wrath of God against such activity but I think what Paul is saying here is something more severe than that the actual practice and lifestyle itself is a reflection of the wrath of God indeed we could actually say that the incidence of AIDS is a more merciful wrath of God than what Paul is talking about because AIDS if it is anything to do with the wrath of God is actually merciful in that it's an action that might prevent people from going down the path further whereas what

[28 : 04] Paul is talking about here is God standing back and letting people pursue their own path and that is more fearsome wrath than any direct intervention as I said well the third time this expression comes is verse 28 to the end of the chapter and Paul then says and since they did not see fit to acknowledge God God gave them up to a literally unfit mind you don't think it's fit to acknowledge God he gives them in return an unfit mind debased mind and to things that should not be done and then comes a list of 21 things it's a fairly depressing list it's very somber in its style firstly there are four general descriptions of human sin he says in verse 29 they were filled with every kind of wickedness evil covetousness malice general and comprehensive is the sense of those first four terms and then five more that people are full of he says they are full of envy full of

murder full of strife full of deceit full of craftiness all things to do with broken relationships and then come 12 things that they are they are firstly gossips and slanderers again things that are breaking down relationships destroying human reputations and so on then come four expressions dealing with human arrogance and pride which I think picks up verse 22 where claiming to be wise in fact they're fools here they're god haters insolent haughty and boastful again it's the same sort of foolish pride that's being described then come two more terms at the end of verse 30 they're inventors of evil that shows how far down the track they've got because they're actually trying to invent new evil rebellious towards parents breaking one of the ten commandments and then a rhetorical climax in verse 31 four terms they are foolish faithless heartless and ruthless technically they're all words that are something less so we might translate it that they are senseless faithless loveless and merciless or somebody else has translated it without brains without honor without love without pity and then comes the conclusion they know

God's decree that is it's obvious in the creation as he said at the beginning of this passage that those who practice such things deserve to die that's the path the destination of the path they walk down yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them that is it's not just the doers but those who applaud others who do it as well and in some ways that's even more sinister yes it's wrong to do these sorts of things but in our society we praise people who are like this we praise people who are covetous or people who are haughty or boastful people who are inventors of evil and so on they're people who are often lauded by our society and in praise and the praise of such people is actually even worse than the doers because as people generally around praise the wrongdoers so society degrades itself even further and quicker the result in the end is death and all of those things are a reflection of God's wrath at work in the world they're not the cause primarily of wrath but they're in effect a reflection because God's wrath is revealed against all who suppress the truth of God who then get distorted minds who practice idolatry and end up in this sort of immorality and ultimately the path leads to death eternal we've got a number of people from our congregation in hospital or have been in hospital in the last week or so and for some of them they've gone in not knowing what is wrong with them one person for example has had a number of tests trying to determine what has caused the obvious sort of discomfort and illness that's there and various tests have proved negative and eventually some sort of diagnosis is made and treatment is then prescribed that we pray and hope will lead to some recovery that is you need a correct diagnosis before correct treatment can be given if we were to diagnose the problems of our world as everybody tries to do there are all sorts of possible answers we often hear of or read about those who make diagnoses of our world that reveal an educational problem or an economic problem a political problem an environmental problem or a sociological problem but the diagnosis here that is God's diagnosis of our world is that at its heart the problem of the world is a theological problem people suppress the truth about God at the heart of our world's problems lies the suppression of truth about God

God made us in the beginning to bear his glory sin from the first couple shunned that glory and suppressed the truth about God God saves us in the gospel so that we might glorify him and his son Jesus Christ that is the purpose of the gospel it's the purpose of Paul writing this letter so instead of being people who have degrading bodies as he said here we ought to be people whose bodies are offered as living sacrifices to God instead of being people with darkened and debased minds here we ought to be people whose minds are transformed and renewed by the gospel of Christ instead of refusing God we ought to be people who practice to do his will his good acceptable and perfect will Paul makes that clear that that's his aim in this letter beginning of chapter 12 he writes I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God what is good and acceptable and perfect that's why Paul writes this letter that's why God reveals the gospel so that our bodies and minds are not as described in chapter 1 but are as they're described in chapter 12 all for the glory of

God and Paul finishes his letter in these words now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith to the only wise God through Jesus Christ to him be the glory forever Amen