



Romans 1:18-32

17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. 29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

If you went by my title alone, many of you would no doubt imagine that I may be talking about the fact that the packer's seem to have no defense this year given that they are ranked 28th in the NFL. At least they are still ahead of the Vikings!

28

Packers

29

Vikings

30

Chargers

31

Redskins

32

Eagles

But the defensive woes of the Packers is not my topic but instead the topic is ‘no defense’, as in, as we stand before the judge, we have no defense. This is what Paul said in verse 20. *For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

The word for excuse is apologia, where we get the English word apologetics.¹ It’s the same word in 1 Peter 3.15—*but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a **defense** to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.* Peter encourages us as believers to be ready to give a defense of

the faith but Paul said that as unbelievers, we had no defense before God. We were without excuse. Every man woman and child stands before the Great Judge and is found guilty.

The question skeptics always ask is, “How can a loving God also be so full of wrath? How could this God of yours send anyone into everlasting, conscious punishment?” The fundamental question they are asking is, “Is God fair?” Actually, what they really mean is that they flat out reject this wrathful God and say that he is no God at all. Most people summarize the Bible as saying that the God in the Old Testament is wrathful and vengeful but Jesus is nothing but love. Such a near-sighted summary does not incorporate all of the promises of wrath and punishment by every Biblical author nor the final wrathful judgment described in Revelation. This final judgment will make OT wrath look like child’s play. People who draw these conclusions are simply not reading the Bible.

But it’s not just skeptics who ask this question of fairness. Christians look at the same descriptions of wrath and eternal punishment and ask, “Is God fair?” sometimes we even struggle with this in our daily lives when we wonder why God would allow such trials to come our way, a bit like this Calvin and Hobbes cartoon.



In one sense it’s a good thing to ask the question, “Is God fair?” because the question you are asking stems from a desire for justice. When a horrific crime is committed, everyone’s natural reaction is a deep desire for justice. Had he lived, the man who shot and killed twelve people at

the Washington Navy Yard would have deserved swift and complete judgment from the courts. Only someone just as deranged as the shooter would say that he did not deserve justice. So our cry for justice that boils up within us is a good thing because where do you think that sense of justice came from? It comes directly from being created in the image of God. You don't have to be a Christian or know the Bible at all to arrive at this sense of justice. It is created within you.

But in another sense, it is quite dangerous to ask the question, "Is God fair?" because it implies that God could do evil, that he is capable of doing something that was *not* just and right. I am not saying you are sinning to ask the question but we start down a dangerous path when we do so. I think what we are actually asking is whether or not our understanding of God is correct. Does God send some to everlasting conscious punishment and some to everlasting joy? And why?

This chapter especially answers the question if God is fair to those who have never heard. What about the heathen living in the jungle? Is God equally fair to them? If we can answer the 'fairness' question in regard to them then we can answer it for everyone.

I know we talked about the wrath of God last Sunday but we really have to deal with this question given the text before us in Romans. Most people consider verse 17 to be the theme of Romans. *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."* However, from verse 18 of chapter one to verse 20 of chapter three, Paul delves deeply into the wrath of God and the sin of mankind.

So rather than ask the question, "Is God fair?" I would prefer to lay out the reasons why God is perfectly just in the way that he deals with us. In other words, I will give you the reasons why we have no defense—why we have no excuse.

First, let's get an overview of the wrath of God from Scripture. I won't repeat the ones we looked at last Sunday.

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. (Nahum 1:2-6)

God has many wonderful attributes but to the marvelous list we must also add jealousy, vengeance and wrath. Also, his wrath and anger are interspersed with his infinite power. *He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers.* Just as the sea and rivers dry up at his command, so do the cities of Bashan, Carmel and Lebanon. But even in the midst of this wrathful passage we again see that the *Lord is slow to anger*. This description of God occurs nine times throughout the OT. While we tend to shy away from these harder attributes of wrath, anger and vengeance, they are always in the context of his love and patience. We will see this in the next chapter when Paul writes, Or

do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:4)

I think what AW Pink says on the subject is very helpful.

Now the wrath of God is as much a Divine perfection as is His faithfulness, power, or mercy. It must be so, for there is no blemish whatever, not the slightest defect in the character of God; yet there would be if "wrath" were absent from Him! Indifference to sin is a moral blemish, and he who hates it not is a moral leper. How could He who is the Sum of all excellency look with equal satisfaction upon virtue and vice, wisdom and folly? How could He who is infinitely holy disregard sin and refuse to manifest His "severity" (Rom. 9:12) toward it? How could He who delights only in that which is pure and lovely, loathe and hate not that which is impure and vile? The very nature of God makes Hell as real a necessity, as imperatively and eternally requisite as Heaven is. Not only is there no imperfection in God, but there is no perfection in Him that is less perfect than another.²

Next we look at Psalm 58:10-11.

The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.

11 Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."

God has the attribute of vengeance but this Psalm states that you and I will "bathe our feet in the blood of the wicked." We will rejoice in God's vengeance upon his enemies because we will share in the Lord's sense of ultimate justice. Obviously we have to be extremely careful with this because such rejoicing can quickly become entangled with our sinful nature. After all, our typical reaction is to want our enemies harmed not out of a sense of divine justice but from sinful anger. This could arouse our vengeance and justify our sinful anger.

This Psalm answers the problem of evil. The problem of evil is usually an attempt to reject God and it goes like this. If God is all-powerful and perfectly good, why does he allow evil to flourish? Since evil does exist then either God is not powerful enough to eliminate it or else he doesn't care that it exists, which makes him evil. By the way, the problem of evil is a problem, once again, because God has placed within us his sense of justice. You are I are bothered by evil because God is bothered by evil. As his image bearers, we reflect the hatred of injustice. This psalm answers the problem of evil because it tells us that evil will one day be vanquished, even if it does not happen according to our time table. It will be so striking that all mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth."

One commentator summarized it like this. "As long as God is God, He cannot behold with indifference that His creation is destroyed and His holy will trodden underfoot. Therefore he meets sin with His mighty and annihilating reaction."³

Likewise, Russell Moore writes, "The grace of God we sing about is amazing precisely because God is just, and won't, like a renegade judge, simply overlook evil."⁴

John MacArthur says something very similar. “They cannot seek grace and salvation unless they are affected with the dread of the wrath of God that is upon them. Unless men sense they are in grave danger there’s no pressure applied to them to change.”⁵

We even sing about the wrath of God in the well known Battle Hymn of the Republic
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

To balance this out, verse three contains the gospel.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
"As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.

So once we have established that wrath and justice are just as much an attribute of God as love and mercy, we need to understand why we deserve God’s justice, why we stand without a defense. Paul answers this in the next few verses. ¹⁹*For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.* The word for “shown in the second phrase is the exact same word as “plain” in the first phrase. Therefore, the verse could be translated this way. *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has **made it plain** to them.*

And exactly how did God make this plain to us? ²⁰*For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.* Every man, woman and child know about God through the creation of God. This is what is known as natural revelation—God revealing himself through the natural, created realm. There are two basic ways in which God reveals himself—natural revelation and special revelation, which means the Scripture. Psalm 19 is the classic example of both natural revelation and special revelation.

The first half of the Psalm is clearly describing natural revelation.

The heavens **declare** the glory of God,
and the sky above **proclaims** his handiwork.
2 Day to day pours out **speech**,
and night to night reveals **knowledge**.
3 There is no **speech**, nor are there **words**,
whose **voice** is not heard.
4 Their **voice** goes out through all the earth,
and their **words** to the end of the world.

Here we have declaration, proclamation, speech, knowledge, words and voice. In other words, there is a type of language in creation that speaks as clearly as God intended it to. The second

half of Psalm 19 goes straight into the special revelation through Scripture. In other words, *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.*

7 The **law** of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the **testimony** of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
8 the **precepts** of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the **commandment** of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;

Admittedly, there is a paradox here because Paul says that god's "invisible" attributes have been clearly seen through creation. The church father, Tertullian described it poetically.

It was not the pen of Moses that initiated the knowledge of the Creator. The vast majority of mankind though they had never heard the name of Moses, to say nothing of his Book know the God of Moses nonetheless. And nature (he said) is the teacher, and the soul is the pupil. One flower of a hedge by itself, I think and I do not say a flower of the meadow, one shell of any sea you like and I do not say a pearl from the Red Sea, one feather of a murre fowl to say nothing of a peacock, will they speak to you of a Creator? If I offer you a rose will you scorn its Maker?

Here is a [good video](#) of the impact of natural revelation. (watch video) Isn't that amazing how math is built into the beauty of nature? God has built such divine structure into every living thing. Do you realize the relevance of this? It means that doing math is a form of worship! Seriously. If you understand it correctly—I don't mean you understand math even, but you understand God divine design—then you will see that math shows the eternal power and divine nature are seen through math. Moreover, all school and learning is a form of worship.

Not everything can be known about God through natural revelation just as not everything can be known about God through the Scriptures. The Bible tells us what we need to know about God but it doesn't tell us all that there is to know. It is fully sufficient but it is certainly not complete, is it? Natural revelation through creation is very limited but we are told that everyone can know "his eternal power and divine nature."

God speaks his divine nature and eternal power through his creation. That's what Paul said to the pagans in Athens, Greece.

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

God is close to everyone but the next verses tell us the problem.

21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Also, verse 18 says that all people suppress God's truth. God has spoken his truth to all and in return, all suppress the truth. The whole world sees it and by that we mean pagans and Muslims and Buddhists and atheists and religious folks. And because he has spoken so clearly and sufficiently for everyone to seek Him, their suppression of the truth has left us all without a defense, without an excuse.

So we ask again, is God fair? He continually reveals himself to the whole world and the world continually suppresses the truth and rejects him. This also goes back to last Sunday's topic about being ashamed of the gospel. If you have doubt about God's fairness then you will be ashamed of the gospel.

Do you want to know what isn't fair? It isn't fair that Jesus had to set aside his glory, leave the Father's side, and carry our sin and the Father's wrath with it. The Father's wrath deserves to fall on us but instead it fell on his one and only Son. That is not fair.

This is what Paul wrote about in Romans 3. *Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

God was just in that his rightly deserved wrath was satisfied through Jesus' substitution on the cross and he was justifier in that he sent his Son to justify us-to atone for our sins.

Furthermore, if you don't think God is fair then it follows that what you think you need from God is more justice, not less. Do you see that if you ask for justice you will get what you ask for? You will get his wrath because that is just. What you and I need is not more justice but more mercy. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper this morning I encourage you to meditate on this.

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¹ ἀναπόλογητος/ anapologetos—no defense, no reason, no excuse

² A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God, The Wrath of God*, ©1930.

³ Moo, *Romans*, p. 100.

⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/wp/2013/07/30/whatever-happened-to-the-wrath-of-god/>

⁵ <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/45-09>