

Sunday, February 17, 2013

HOPE RISING FROM THE DAWN OF CREATION

Romans 1:18-22

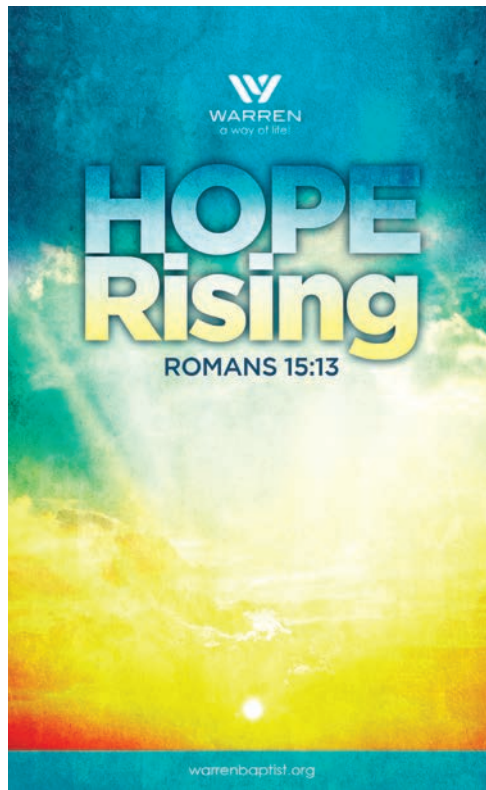
Roller coasters are a rather strange phenomena. They are strange because they take the sum of our worst fears and bring them together with the highest thrills. We are caught somewhere between terror and excitement throughout the entire experience.

Most of you can remember the first roller coaster ride you had or a roller coaster you swore you would never ride again. You find a seat, get strapped in, feel the car move beneath you and begin the climb—click click click click click click click click. At the top, there is almost a moment of eerie silence... and then, incredible screams fill the air as the spiralling, downward plunge takes you on a crazy, completely out of control thrill ride.

Since the beginning of the year, we have been climbing through the introduction of the book of Romans. Week by week, we have felt the tug of click click click. However, beginning today until the end of Romans 3 (and ultimately through the end of book), we will be released over the top into passages that frankly get worse before they get better. It will be violent, chaotic and uncertain. It will bring out our worst fears and take us to the edge of everything scintillating and thrilling.

Although this “over the top of the hill” plunge will take us upside down and right side up with twists and turns along the way, we will ultimately experience what God has to say about life, our world and culture. It is the uncertainty and fear of this adventure that causes many people to never get involved in a serious study of this book and its text.

Frankly, it is easier to walk by and ignore it than it is to get in the seat and take a ride. But if we are going to honor the word of God and the testimony of



Jesus Christ, we have no choice but to take the ride and see life as God sees it concerning us. So buckle your seat belts. It's time to begin.

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18 ESV).

The phrase, “for the wrath of God,” is connected to the preceding passage that talks about the righteousness of God being revealed. Our study today reveals the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men and women who suppress the truth.

“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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. 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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:18-22 ESV).

Most of what man calls “wise” or “wisdom” is foolishness according to the Bible. It is foolish because of where man’s wisdom takes and releases us. To follow the path of man is to pursue the wrath of God.

The Bible emphasizes this matter of the wrath of God. From Romans 1:18 through Romans 3:20, everything is linked back to this concept of the wrath of God.

It is not exactly a motivational maxim for any of us to know that God is a God of wrath. No one can really celebrate or get excited about that. It is not a feel good message or positive “pick me up.” Some people come to church expecting the pastor to make them feel good, but my job is not to make you feel good or bad. My job is to clarify the truth of God and to bring confidence and comfort based on the promise of God. Sometimes it has to get worse before it can get better. Sometimes the only way good news can really be heard is after you understand the bad news.

So for the next few weeks, we are going to look at the various aspects of the wrath of God and the unrighteousness of man. Although it is not always inspirational, it is important. Why? One of the simplest reasons is because we need to...

Decrease a Tendency Toward Superficial Spirituality

If we are not careful, we can be spiritual in a shallow way. We are glad to give answers, but we don’t always want to deal with assessments.

Have you ever had someone you love diagnosed with cancer? It doesn’t matter where it is located, if the “C” word is mentioned by his/her physician, the shock and trauma are overwhelming concerning their future well being, but it also rocks everything in your world.

Although this does not happen every time, sometimes there is an amazing moment when a physician can look

at you and say there is a treatment protocol, surgical procedure or action that has had positive results in similar cases. Suddenly the good news is really good news because you know how bad the bad news was.

Today in Christian life and in many of our churches, I feel we are so busy telling everyone the sweet, good news—and we must!—that it becomes superficial because we don't deal with the root of the problem, human sin. Not that we can fix it, but we can expose it and say what God says about it.

Have you had a chocolate-covered strawberry lately? Pretty good, right? You've gotta love a strawberry covered in chocolate! But if you have a chocolate-covered strawberry and the strawberry is rotten on the inside, it doesn't matter what type of chocolate is drizzled on the outside. The treat becomes a tragedy when it gets to your mouth.

What about a splinter underneath your skin? Infection will set in if that break or breach in the skin is not treated, cleansed and allowed to heal.

Several years ago, I discarded an object and a small portion of broken glass lodged in my finger. At the time, I removed the glass, positioned a Band-Aid over the spot and thought the healing process would begin. Even though the skin healed on the outside, something prevented complete healing on the inside. In the following months, every time I typed on my keyboard, that particular finger caused pain throughout my entire hand. I thought, *"Either this isn't healing right or there is something still in there."*

I made an appointment with my physician who confirmed my suspicions. He numbed the area using various needles and made a surgical cut to remove the remaining glass.

Why tell this story? The physician had to do more damage than was initially done to take care of the problem.

As a pastor who believes we need to honor the authority of Scripture, it is frustrating for me to see how many

in the Christian community want to put "happy face Band-Aids" over the infection and brokenness of our world without addressing the real problem.

Here is the bottom line: we are comfortable with the Gospel that assures everybody of God's love, but we quickly become ashamed of a Gospel that confronts people with sin and judgment. If we do not communicate the entire truth of the Gospel, then a half truth becomes a whole lie. It is not enough to give people an answer unless they understand the need.

Increase Respect for God's Sovereign Authority

This is the second reason we need to study about the wrath of God. If there is anything that has been categorically lost in America and in our culture, it is that we have lost the fear of God. And the church has added to this!

We have been so busy trying to make God nice, no one seems to understand the authority of God or the terror of the Lord that ought to bring shame, disgrace and pressure to move from evil and seek the grace of God.

We are a world without consequence and we defy authority. Until we get the right picture of God, we will never get a right answer in the Gospel. We have to understand why the Gospel matters.

The Gospel is not like a pack of Splenda—low-fat, low-calorie—that you sprinkle on something to sweeten it. Yet we want to take the Gospel and put a little "Splenda" on everybody. Then we pat them on the back and send them to hell because they have never repented of sin. Since we were so busy sweetening them up, all they got was a taste, but they never got the truth of the Gospel.

Church, we have to be passionate about preaching and sharing the Gospel. And that makes people uncomfortable before it brings comfort.

It is not an uncommon occurrence to see slogans printed in church bulletins or on signs that communicate

something like "God is not mad at you." I understand why people say it. Frankly, we have had some moralizing, self-righteous, angry, hardhearted "Christians" in the news lately who have made *their* wrath the substitute for the wrath of God.

God has not called us to be terrorists under the Christian flag. God has not called us to despise His grace or to fail to preach the hope of the Gospel. Be assured, God doesn't need our help with wrath. Some may think we need to get stirred up and set off so we can show others we are mad about something. However, God is fine and doesn't need our help.

The wrath of God is true and sure. The Bible, beginning in the Old Testament, tells us about the wrath of God seen against His own people, the nation of Israel:

"So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel" (Numbers 25:3 ESV).

God's wrath was against His people, but the Bible also tells us:

"Set yourselves in array against Babylon all around, all you who bend the bow; shoot at her, spare no arrows, for she has sinned against the Lord" (Jeremiah 50:14 ESV).

The wrath of God was also against the nation of Babylon because of their work to bring injury and suppression to Israel. So God is an equal opportunity "wrath giver." He extends His wrath because of who He is.

Quickly, let me clarify. When I speak about the wrath of God, I am not talking about God being some sort of heavenly "hot head," somebody who is red in the face and steaming, often blowing things up.

God's anger is not human anger. Human anger is marred, flawed and limited. It is often exhibited in unreasonable outbursts, uncontrolled passions and self-vindication.

People can get mad and do crazy things. Some do it in the name of

their own justification, others do it in the name of righteous justification, but human wrath is not like the wrath of God. God's wrath is always "in the right" or "righteous."

"It is holy in response to the unholy, a just reaction to the unjust, and a pure rejection of the impure... His wrath is intrinsically right and failure to respond in wrath would be intrinsically wrong."

—Stuart Briscoe

The wrath of God matters because it is a part of the balance and blend of divine perfection. If God did not have wrath and anger, He would not be God.

*It is impossible for
God to be anything good without
hatred for everything evil.*

If this were not true, it would be like a man saying I love my wife because I love all women. Think about that. Is he really her husband or is she just one of many in his life?

The issue has to do with character. Because of who and what God is, the wrath of God is something we are to understand and respect. To violate and dishonor the righteousness of God is to be under the wrath of God. If we violate and dishonor His righteousness, we live in defiance of God. That is why the Bible says,

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7 ESV).

We have talked about righteousness and that God is *in the right*. When we speak about righteousness, we are talking about two things.

(1) Righteousness means that God is in the right in His *standard*. He has a standard for right and wrong.

(2) The righteousness of God is also a *security*. Because of who God is and how He works, we don't have to fear the evils of this world because we are secure the Righteous Judge will oversee all things concerning us. As a result, there is hope and comfort in the righteousness of God.

However, there is also great terror in the righteousness of God. If we do not fulfill His standard, we ultimately come under His wrath. The Bible is clear that God has a standard and He hates sin.

If you could see my speaking notes, you would see highlights across the pages. Before I stand and speak, I sit quietly in my office, go through my notes and re-preach this message to my own heart. I can tell if it is a good message depending on the number of highlights.

At the end of Romans 1, it is as if God takes a "highlighter" to human behavior and tells us why His wrath is revealed against us. There are four explanations to the wrath of God that are seen in Romans 1:18 and following.

Why is the "wrath of God" revealed against us?

1. Our Sinful Action of Internal Suppression (Romans 1:18)

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

Have you ever been outside during the summer with a water hose stretched around to one corner of your yard? If you are like me, I may find after watering one spot, I have more water than I need. Instead of running all the way back to the other side of the house to turn off the faucet, I can pick up the water hose, bend it and hold it. What happens? Does the water turn off? No. I just hear the sound of sssshhhhhh. The flow and pressure of the water is still coming, but I just suppress it by bending the water hose. I hold back the water for a moment.

The word for "suppress" in the Greek text is actually a nautical term. It was the idea of a helmsman in a boat or ship who, when the winds and waves were going against him, still set on trying to hold the ship on course despite the resistance. In this case, though, the Bible is saying it is man's resistance of God.

The reason the wrath of God is against us is because of our own internal suppression. We are so determined to live our own way and ignore the truth of God, that ultimately, we reject God.

The rejection of God for mankind is not because of a lack of information; it is because of a willful ignorance, a defiance that says no to God. Why? If we admit the reality of God and moral responsibility, then all of us come under judgment. And so, because we love darkness and our sins more than we love God and the light, we suppress the truth in darkness. As a result, the Bible says the wrath of God is against us.

Most people cannot find God for the same reason a thief cannot find a police officer. They do not want to find God. They are living in sin and darkness. There is something in their heart they are holding on to and they don't understand the severity of the wrath of God against their sin. They suppress the truth of God.

2. Our Stubborn Denial of External Creation (Romans 1:19-20)

"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them... clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world (Romans 1:19-20 ESV).

There is a witness of creation on the inside as well as the outside. On the inside, every human being has an imprint, an impression that moves us, not only to justify existence, but to find significance in life.

There is a natural prompting in every human heart to worship. It may be distorted, darkened and include idols of various kinds, but there is a natural tendency and desire in mankind to worship. Historically and categorically all human civilizations are religious.

"You may find cities without walls, or literature, or kings, or houses, or wealth or money, without gymnasias or theaters, but no one ever saw a city without temples or gods." —Plutarch

Due to this internal worship drive, everyone worships someone, something, sometime, somewhere. Just because you don't have a statuesque image does not mean you are not an idolator, an idol worshipper. You can worship the god of riches, the god of pleasure, the god of knowledge, the god of technology, etc.

Not only is there an internal issue of the denial of creation, there is also the external denial of creation. The Bible says,

"The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1a ESV).

All of creation is a declaration of the handiwork of God, whether it be the greatest and grandest starscape or the smallest evidence of DNA. Everything in this world—its order, arrangement, complexity—declares the glory of God. It is intended to prompt us, not just to find significance in ourselves, but to live with a sense of wonder and awe of the God who made us for Himself.

When we refuse to worship God the Creator, then there is an absorption and adoration of the creature. The first of all false gods is man worshiping himself. Wasn't it Satan, the serpent, who asked in the Garden of Eden, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'... You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Genesis 3:1b, 4b-5 ESV).

3. Our Foolish Assumption of Total Control (Romans 1:21-22)

People not only deny the witness of God in creation, both macro and micro, but there is the absolute assumption of our own control. The greatest deception regarding us is that we are the center of all things. Therefore so much of our world is indulged in this idolatry of human importance and the unimportance and irrelevance of God.

Life without God is the antithesis of everything we are made for.

When we willfully reject the knowledge of God, God says we become fools because every choice has a consequence. We cannot break the spiritual, moral and intellectual laws of God nor live without a godless existence.

"... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25 ESV).

Instead of seeing us (humanity) as special in creation, we see ourselves as mere creatures and we live out our beastly impulses.

"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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Romans 1:21-23 ESV).

We are not in control. We become people of bondage when we try to live without God. We can deny the laws of God, but we never disprove them. We can resist them, but we cannot retract them.

This is true in every other area of life. Violate the laws of agriculture? No harvest. Violate the laws of architecture? Buildings collapse. Violate the physical laws of health and well-being? Sickness occurs. You can deny the law of gravity, but it doesn't keep you from falling down. You can doubt the law of aerodynamics, but planes and birds continue to fly overhead. Yet when it comes to the moral law of God—clearly specified in His word and written into creation—we somehow think we have the power and control to resist it... and not be fools.

"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1 ESV).

When you expunge God, all you do is prove yourself to be a fool. "Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:22 ESV). No one is able to resist the law of God:

"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7-8 ESV).

There is a moral law of the harvest:

Suffering follows sin.

When we sin, we suffer. So you know what we try to do? We try to remove the idea of sinfulness so that we can somehow limit the power of suffering. We throw money, ideas, initiatives and other things at it, but at the end of the day, no one will disprove or retract the law of God.

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity" (Romans 1:24a ESV).

Now we move from idolatry to immorality, an immorality that even takes us to insanity.

"... to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 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" (Romans 1:24b-25 ESV, underline added for emphasis).

What does it look like when we make that *exchange*? What happens when God gives us up and gives us over to a debased mind?

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 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. 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. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God,

insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Romans 1:26-31 ESV).

That is a pretty good description of where America today. If you had to characterize who we are culturally, that is it! We don't just have a moral crisis in America, we have a judgment crisis. God is judging our nation because our nation has expunged the knowledge of God!

We think we are smart people, successful and powerful enough to repeal the law of God. Don't ever think that! This nation will be on the rubble heap where every other nation has been who has despised the truth of God and has proven themselves to be fools. That is where we are living today—what God says is right, our world says is wrong; what God says is wrong, our world says is right.

4. Our Moral Defiance of God's Natural Design (Romans 1:24-25)

God designed us for Himself. When we refuse to worship our Creator God, we worship the creature. That means we accommodate, indulge, reinforce and do everything we can to justify creature existence apart from Creator design.

Homosexuality is clearly the subject talked about in Romans 1:26-27. The only way to get this out of the Bible is to take a pair of scissors and cut it out. However, there is no way to take away the clarity of what God is saying. Frankly, we are foolish to think psychological, emotional and cultural arguments can somehow change the anatomy and physiology of the human body.

I am not saying there are not issues that contribute or experiences that reinforce homosexuality. And I am not saying this sin is worse than other sins. Many sins are listed here and none of us are left out of this passage. There is no grading of sin. But the Apostle Paul lets us see what happens when we remove the knowledge of God. We don't become wise; we become fools.

We are living in a culture of foolishness. But please hear me today—my goal, my heart, my desire; I do not want to fuel or in any way encourage hatred toward the gay and lesbian community. But neither am I going to take a “happy face Band-Aid” and say, “Have a nice day and just do what you want to do,” especially if we are talking about the norms of our culture.

I cannot speak from the Bible and say, “You know, the Bible doesn't really mean this. God is not really serious about this.” God is serious about all sin—my sin, your sin, everyone's sin. Therefore we have to take seriously those things for which God is serious.

God talks about the affect of sins. While not all sins may be equal in the way we view them, they are all equal in affect, “... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23 ESV). Without Christ, we all are lost in darkness and bondage. We only have hope through a Savior, Jesus Christ. However, from what the Bible says, I don't dare stand up and say homosexuality is natural, normal or acceptable.

In our country, the arts, television and government communities—even some church communities—have an agenda that communicates homosexuality is okay. Hear me today as I speak from the truth of God's Word, the Boy Scouts of America cannot repeal the law of God. Congress cannot repeal the law of God. I don't care how many executive orders he gives, the President of the United States cannot trump God. And I don't say that to be disrespectful. I am just saying there is an authority greater than all of these authorities.

Scripture tells us to honor those in positions of authority. We are to show dignity and respect to every human being. As a Christian, we have no right to picket, march or self-appoint ourselves to inflict the judgment of God on others. We are to be the hope of God through the Gospel. But we should never provide a Gospel that doesn't deal with the wrath of God, the unrighteousness of sin and the need for a Savior who can transform us.

There is suffering due to deaf, mute and powerless idols; suffering due to immorality that brings bondage, brokenness, stain and shame; and insanity that lets people think that can somehow live apart from the God who made them.

“This section does not teach ‘evolution’ (man started low and climbed high) but ‘devolution’ mankind started high and, because of sin, sank lower than the beasts... Human history begins with man knowing God. Human history is not the story of a beast that worshipped idols, and then evolved into a man worshipping one God. Human history is the opposite: man began knowing God, but turned from the truth and rejected God.” —Warren Wiersbe

When we willfully reject God in defiance and darkness, the Bible says there is a day when God gives us up. This is the ultimate dilemma. It is the dilemma between the *righteousness of God* that demands the wrath of God and the *love of God* that brings the grace of God.

How can this be resolved? If the law of God is true and we are all sinners, then we are all under the wrath of God.

Here is the message: the Creator became a Creation without sin. Jesus Christ, the son of God, came from heaven to intervene and to do what we cannot do to fix ourselves. Through suffering for mine and your sin, through bearing the debt of our sin through death on the cross and burial into the grave, Jesus triumphantly rose from the dead that He might break the power of sin and remove from us the beastly quality of a heart without God and give us new life, power, hope and a future. That is the Gospel, and that is what makes the Gospel beautiful.

Christ became one of us that we might be made right with God. Christ and Christ alone moves us from the wrath of God to the righteousness of God. That is why the Apostle Paul says,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16 ESV).

Everyone, anyone who comes to Christ—doesn't matter where you have been, what you have done, where you are—it is the same answer for all. It is the same for the Jew (religious, ceremonial, traditional), for the Gentile (pagan, indulgent), and for everyone:

"For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:17 ESV).

You can be made righteous by putting faith in what God has done in Jesus Christ. I invite you to do that today.

Father, I thank You for the clarity with which we read and study and observe Your words speaking to the needs of our world. I pray You would use this message and these studies to remove from us a superficial spirituality that is not honoring to You.

Father, help us not just try to be nice people, but to pursue the righteousness of God. I also pray You would use Your Word today to help us increase our understanding of Your sovereign rule and authority and that, Lord, we cannot deny, we cannot despise, we cannot repeal what You have said in Your Word. God, may there be a cry from the hearts of people today that would say, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Father, we know the stain and strain of sin. How we pray each would know the power of God and salvation through Jesus Christ, for I pray that in this moment. Amen.

David H. McKinley is Pastor-Teacher of Warren Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia. This message has been edited for print purposes. You may listen or watch this message in its entirety by visiting warrenbaptist.org.

Credit must be given and noted in the following way when excerpts are printed or used: David H. McKinley, Pastor-Teacher; Warren Baptist Church, Augusta, GA.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.