

## Lesson Four

(1:18-32)

### KNOWING GOD AND RECOGNIZING SIN

#### THE WRATH OF GOD

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness.

Startling, but wholly in harmony with the rest of Scripture, is the lightning like opening statement of this first doctrinal section of Romans: "The wrath of God is revealed . . . against all sin" (1:18). Paul's words about salvation have been tranquil, but like a bolt out of the blue comes the information that God possesses the potential to exercise wrath. George Stevens says of wrath, "It is God's holy displeasure against sin — the reaction of His nature against sin . . . It is the energy with which His love, being holy, repudiates its opposite," (*The Theology of the New Testament*, page 377).

God cannot smile upon even a simple act of sin because his very nature is repulsed by it. Frequently it is heard that God could not be at once a God of wrath and a God of love. Man being what he is prefers the latter and attempts to rationalize a God of wrath out of existence.

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

Love and wrath, however, are not opposites. Mercy is the opposite of wrath and hatred is the antithesis of love. Never should love and wrath be positioned as opposites or thought of as being incapable of coexistence. Wrath and mercy as well as hatred and love are attributes of God and all of them meet at the cross. God hates sin. He loves mankind. The wrath of God is somehow alleviated in the death of Jesus who "died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3). Through Christ mercy is channeled to man. There is no impossible paradox in the nature of God because He exercises wrath as well as mercy and hates as well as loves. All of these characteristics are clearly exhibited in man who was made in God's likeness and image. If wrath and mercy and love and hatred are found in man, how is it so impossible for these same elements to be present in man's creator?

God's personal wrath is not to be confused with the result of his wrath. Wrath is no more impersonal with God than sin is impersonal with man. It is true that God hates sin but loves the sinner. That truth, however, should never be turned into the error of depersonalizing sin. Sin must never be viewed as something which just happens apart from any responsibility of man for that sin. God does not sin, and when men sin, they fall under the blaze of God's anger. As sin cannot occur independently from man, neither can God's wrath be separated from Him. His wrath is not some kind of an impersonal force in nature which God set in motion at the outset of earth's history and which goes on operating like the law of gravity. It is true that man reaps the consequences of breaking certain laws of nature which were established by God but that fact does not give one the liberty to depersonalize God's wrath, to spell it with capital letters (WRATH) and place it in creation as some impersonal principle which only operates in the realm of natural law. Neither can one properly capitalize the word SIN as if it were some kind of an impersonal force and divorce it from an individual. It is man who sins, and it is the holy God of heaven who is personally affronted by man's sinful thoughts and acts. God's wrath is just as personal as is his love, mercy and forgiveness. For divergent views of "the wrath of God" see Barclay's commentary on Romans pages 17, ff., in which he holds the non-personal, natural law view and Bruce's commentary on Romans, page 83, which contends that God's wrath is personal.

Paul places all sin under the wrath of God and his vocabulary reflects two classes of sins (v. 18). The sin of idolatry and an improper attitude toward God (1:18-23) are the kinds of sins designated by the word "ungodliness." These are sins which relate directly to God and are religious in nature. The sins of immorality discussed in verses 24-28 are catalogued in verses 29-32 and fall naturally under the heading of "unrighteousness" (v. 18).

Just in passing it is interesting to note there is ready agreement among

scholars that Paul's catalogue of sin is not embellished nor overstated. Bruce says Paul is not exaggerating in his catalogue of sin. According to McGarvey, "Petronius, Suetonius, Martial, Seneca, Virgil, Juvenal, Lucian, and other classic writers verify the statements of Paul." Barclay states that fourteen of the first fifteen Roman emperors were homosexuals.

Verse eighteen refers to a negative influence which is universal and timeless. When men possess the truth but live as if they were ignorant of that truth, it is a strong deterrent to the program of God. Sin is always instrumental in hiding, suppressing, and hindering the truth. The "Golden Mouth" preacher of early church history, John Chrysostom, held that the most effective means of conversion of the pagan was a demonstration of righteousness in the lives of those who were members of the Christian society. He taught, "There would be no more heathens if we would be true Christians."

### THE SIN OF ATHEISM

19 Because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them. 20 For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse: 21 because that, knowing God, they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks; but became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened. 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

Paul appeals to the forceful testimony of natural revelation to show that all men are responsible for a knowledge of God who is the creator of all as well as for all acts performed by man which are contrary to God's will. God made man a rational being who is capable of receiving information, evaluating information received and arriving at a logical conclusion. The mind of man is an absolutely essential correlative of revelation. What good is a shepherd without sheep and of what value is a broadcasting station unless someone has a receiving set? How can divine revelation function without a rational mind to be cognizant of it? God manifested his own being and presence (v. 19) "in them," that is, in their minds. He made the knowledge of his existence and creative power known to man through the things which He created. The content of

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

verse twenty is sometimes indicated to be oxymoronic. The word Oxymoronic is a compound word stemming from *oxys* which means sharp and *moros* from which is derived the word moron. Hence the definition of an oxymoronic statement is, a sharp, dull saying. When one first reads "invisible things . . . are clearly seen" one is apt to say that is a stupid statement, (v. 20). But the more one considers the full force of the saying, and the explanatory phrase "through the things that are made," the more profound and meaningful the statement becomes. The invisible attributes of God are in evidence by the things which he made. This is the declaration also of the Psalmist, (19:1-4).

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God;  
And the firmament showeth his handiwork.
- 2 Day unto day uttereth speech,  
And night unto night showeth knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech nor language;  
Their voice is not heard.
- 4 Their line is gone out through all the earth,  
And their words to the end of the world.  
In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun.

No man can excuse himself for not being aware of God (v. 20). Gentiles, according to Paul (v. 21), had known God but "their senseless heart was darkened" (v. 21). The light of revelation had been deliberately extinguished. They were like a man who turns out the light in the room in which he is sitting and curses the darkness. Paul would not have put his approval upon the popular evolutionary view of the origin of man nor upon the humanistic view of the origin of Scripture. He did not believe that man evolved but that he was created. Neither did he believe that so-called "revelation" was the result of man's search for God. Rather than evolving toward God he devolved and that process of devolution led him to the position of being a fool. It is the fool that says in his heart there is no God (v. 22 and Psalm 14:1). It is the fool who contends that inert matter and motion created life; that unintelligent mass created intelligence; that mute matter created speech; that chaos created a cosmos.

Man's mind is never a vacuum. Either truth or error is present. One is as Jesus said, "either for or against" God.

"The spacious firmament on high  
With all the blue ethereal sky,  
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,  
Their great Original proclaim:  
The unwearied sun, from day to day  
Does his creator's power display,  
And publishes to every land  
The work of an almighty hand."

— Author Unknown

## THE SIN OF HOMOSEXUALITY

24 Wherefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts unto uncleanness, that their bodies should be dishonored among themselves; 25 for that they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever, Amen. 26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile passions: for their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature: 27 and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another, men with men working unseemliness, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was due.

As there is no excuse for any man not to know God, so also no man can excuse himself for failing to recognize sin. The will of God is "written in their hearts" and their conscience condemns when they do not obey (Romans 2:15).

It is typical of Paul to argue from the general to the specific. Here he moves from the general subject of sin to a particular sin. The one which Paul cites as a particular example is homosexuality. It is not uncommon in our generation to have approval placed upon homosexuality as if it had the total acceptance of God. Apart from the Bible, by natural revelation, one ought to know clearly what the Creator intended as far as the relationship of man and woman is concerned. "By the things made" we know God. The same rule applies to sin. Only a moron could miss the truth about God's original intentions with reference to sexual relations and pro-creation by just looking at a man and at a woman. Man was not made for man nor woman for woman and Paul does not hesitate to pronounce the wrath of God upon those who insist in perversion of the will of God as is clearly evident in creation and later forcefully stated in the supernatural revelation recorded in Scripture.

The pagan temples of Khajuraho, India, were constructed during the tenth and eleventh centuries under the Chandellas dynasty. There were eighty-five temples erected, of which twenty-five remain in varying stages of preservation. One cannot but marvel at the decorative details chiseled by hands possessing consummate ability in the soft limestone with varying shades of pink, buff, and pale yellow. At the same time one cannot but be repulsed by the subject of many of those reliefs which portray erotic couples in highly-contorted postures. Sometimes it is man with man, and more base than homosexuality, numerous works depict humans in union with beasts. The guide called our attention to these works of art with praise not only for their mechanics but for their spiritual interpretation which was that man was trying to transcend

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

himself and all desire and find deliverance from the flesh and union with the Divine. A modern Indian author speaking of this sex theme of the artwork of Khajuraho says, "Whatever the interpretation of these erotic scenes, there is certainly nothing sordid or coarse about them." One wonders where our society will stop in its departure from God. How long will it be before bestiality will be condoned again and to what depths of bestiality will men sink? Today men secure licenses to marry men. How long will it be before men want moral liberty to marry a cow? When God made Adam, all the beasts were brought before him. Not one was found to be a suitable companion, so God made "a woman, and brought her unto man." No change in that divine economy has ever been acceptable to God (Genesis 2:18-25).

### GOD GAVE THEM UP

28 And even as they refused to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up into a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not fitting; 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity; whisperers, 30 backbiters, hateful to God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, 31 without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, unmerciful: 32 who, knowing the ordinance of God, that they that practise such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but also consent with them that practise them.

God, in his justice, does not give up any man to sin simply because he has not been taught religious truth and does not know God or sin. But when persons "exchange the truth of God for a lie" (v. 25) and refuse "to have God in their knowledge" (v. 28), God will turn away from them and allow sin to rule their lives. God will give them up! Three times it is stated emphatically that God "gave them up." He gave them up to lust and uncleanness (v. 24); to "vile passion" (v. 26), and to a "reprobate mind" (v. 28). Such sin is, in consequence, the equivalent of the "sin unto death" of 1 John 5:16. John is so certain that one who has fallen away from the faith once embraced is in a lost state that he indicates one may not pray for a person to be saved while he remains in that state of apostasy. "God gave them up," may also be, in consequence, the equivalent of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. The non-Christian may constantly and finally reject the influence of the Holy Spirit to accept Christ as Savior and Lord. These three sinful states, "sin

unto death," "blasphemy against the Spirit" and the state of sin in which God gives one up may each have some different emphasis. The "sin unto death" may be committed by a "brother" which I interpret to mean a Christian. If Plummer is right when he describes blasphemy against the Spirit as a rejection of Christ which is "constant" and "final," then that act is committed by a non-Christian. When Paul indicates that God has given men up, he may be speaking either of those in apostasy or of those who at no time possessed faith. If there is some shade of difference with reference to who is committing the sin or what the act of sin is, the end result of all three is the same — the wrath of God.

Is there really a place in life wherein one has reached a point of no return? This question has always given me pause. As a much younger man I sang the words at evangelistic meetings,

"There's a line that is drawn  
By rejecting our Lord  
Where the call of His Spirit is lost  
And you hurry along  
With a pleasure made throng  
Have you counted the cost?"

The chorus of that song closed with the lines,

"Even now it may be  
That the line you have crossed.  
Have you counted the cost?"

— A. J. Hodge, 1923

It is my conviction now that on the basis of God's foreknowledge, God can, at a given point in a man's life give him up. When God reaches a decision on the basis of his omniscience, His action is certain and not retractable.

This action of God may not be reduced to some kind of human, angry initiation. It is not simply abandonment of a person or permissive non-interference in the life of an individual on the part of God. This divine action should never be minimized to be nothing more than God saying, "Okay, you go your way and I'll go mine." This is a judicial, judgmental act of God, and it seals a man's destiny as surely and finally as if he were before the great final judgment bar of God.

Line by us unseen,  
By which each path is crossed,  
Beyond which God himself has shown  
That He who goes is lost.

— Author Unknown

God will never violate human freedom of choice. God does not place men in straight jackets. When men give themselves up to unbelief and

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

sin, God will give them up (Cf. Ephesians 4:17-19; II Thessalonians 2:8-12).

Two warnings must be given to those who may agree with the author's interpretation of the phrase, "God gave them up" as being judicial. One is that although God is the efficient controller of all things, he does not tempt men to sin. He does not cause men to sin but rather reacts to the sinful state in which man chooses to live and for which a man is wholly, personally responsible.

Secondly, although God gives men up, we must never do so. God has infinite knowledge which we do not possess. We must never play God! As long as a man lives, he must be viewed as a potential candidate for heaven, and we must do all within our power to bring him into that divine fellowship.

### READER'S REVIEW:

1. What is it that makes the opening statement about God's wrath so startling?
2. What is the most basic reason one can cite to explain why God cannot approve of sin?
3. Cite the four attributes of God's character which are included in this lesson.
4. Explain how the four attributes of God you have just listed meet at the cross.
5. What are the potential errors to be avoided by rationalizing and depersonalizing God's wrath to be WRATH and man's sin to be SIN?
6. What is the stated effect of possessing truth but not living in harmony with that truth?
7. According to Chrysostom, what was an effective method of converting pagans?
8. Explain the author's use of the word "devolution."
9. Define the word oxymoronic and give an example of its usage in Chapter One of Romans.
10. What kind of revelation is being discussed by Paul in Chapter One?
11. The Scriptures speak of those who are fools for many reasons. For what reason does Paul call certain people fools?
12. What are the two general classifications of sin which Paul discusses?
13. What are Paul's specific examples of sins which fall under the two general classifications?
14. Why will God give a man up to sinful forces?



15. State your understanding of the force of the phrase, "God gave them up."
16. What other *Biblical phrases depicting men in a sinful state* does the author parallel with the state of sin one has reached when God gives him up?
17. Why is God's omniscience and His foreknowledge important to any discussion of the phrase "God gave them up"?
18. Two warnings are given at the close of this lesson. State the warning which relates to an understanding of God honoring man as a free moral agent.
19. What is the last warning of this lesson which deals with man's attitude toward man?