

Romans 1:18-21

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Those who live unrighteous lives, whether believers or nonbelievers, will experience the wrath of God. The wrath of God here is God giving us over to the natural consequences of our choices. God has given everyone knowledge of right and wrong, giving no one an excuse.

The righteousness of God is revealed by men and women exercising a living faith in the true and living God (Romans 1:16,17—the theme verses). But God does not only interact with righteousness and justice in the world. As we saw in the theme verses and the context of the quote from Habakkuk 2:4, God also deals with *ungodliness and unrighteousness/injustice* lived by those who *suppress the truth in unrighteousness*:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them (vv 18-20).

As we will see in chapter 3, Paul's opponents will claim that since he teaches that we are saved by God's grace, apart from the law, then he means that everyone ought to sin as much as possible (Romans 3:7-8). So at the very beginning of this letter, Paul declares his position on sin: it ought to be avoided because of the terrible and severe adverse consequences it brings.

Sin comes from pride. To live in pride is to say "I will do what I want to" and live in disobedience to God. There is a stark consequence to sin: God pours out His wrath on sin. In Habakkuk, God removed His hand of protection and allowed the wrath of the Babylonians to descend on Israel. We will see in this section that God deals similarly with us as individuals.

If we insist on living with pride and *suppressing the truth, which is evident within us, for God has made it evident to us* (v 19), God will judge us in the same manner. God will remove His protection and "give us over" to our own sinful nature. It is important to note that we all have a sin nature. Believers are given the resurrection power of Jesus to overcome our sin nature. But this power only does us good when we engage it through a walk of faith.

However, this power can go unused. If instead of using our God-given resurrection power to overcome sin, we give in to our sin nature, we can still experience the consequence of God's cause-effect moral universe. And that is God's wrath in delivering us over to our own nature.

The wrath of God is revealed from Heaven (v 18); it pours out in judgment on those who walk in pride and disobedience to God. When we are judged, no one can claim, "But I didn't know." God has placed within each of us a moral compass: knowledge of what is right and wrong. We can see this in children. Children are quick to point out the moral failures of others; we hear them make statements such as, "That's not fair," or "He won't share."

However, children are usually reluctant to apply the moral compass to themselves, and this is the fundamental problem: pride. We know what is right but want an exception for ourselves. This

prideful way of living is the contrast to the righteous (or just) way of living, which comes only by faith in God's way, as described in the theme verses 1:16-17:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

God never changes, and the same judgment God applied to pride in the Habakkuk 2:4 passage will be applied 500 years later at the time Paul is writing Romans, or 2,500 years later with us today.

Not only has God given us knowledge of *His invisible attributes* (v 20), which ought to result in a moral compass, but God has also embedded within the creation all around us ample evidence that God is the Creator and that we are creatures who are accountable to Him. Later in Romans, Paul will quote from the Psalms to make the point that the creation itself is sufficient to convey the gospel, the good news (Romans 10:16 –18). Prideful living contrasts with the righteous (or just) way of living, which comes only by faith that God's way is the best way.

God never changes. He does not tolerate prideful living. He created a cause-effect into the moral universe that is just as sure as the cause-effect He designed into the physical universe.

It is human nature to make *excuses*, but when it comes to answering to God for doing what is right, no one's *excuses* will stand up.

Although God's *eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made* (v 20), we tend to deny it. God has embedded within the creation all around us ample evidence that He is the Creator and that we are creatures who are accountable to Him. But too often we ignore it. Like children who know innately that their parents know better, we tend to want to make our own way. But we know, ultimately, that our parents' way is best. Therefore we are *without excuse*, and will suffer the consequences of our choices.

This is true for believers as well. Although we have been granted the resurrection power to overcome sin, unless we walk in faith, believers can (and often do) deny our Creator. When we do so, we bring upon ourselves judgment and wrath as consequences of our behavior: *For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened* (v 21).

Just as the elect Israelites in the time of Habakkuk, so it is with believers today—prideful self-seeking leads to judgment. The particular judgment referred to in this passage is that God will remove His protection and turn us over to our own sinful natures. Our fall comes when we fail to *honor Him as God*. Rather than acknowledging that God knows best for us, we assert that we know what is best.

And rather than *give thanks* for our circumstances, we insist that we are entitled to circumstances that are “better.” We demand “more.” In each case, what we desire is unobtainable, and will inevitably lead to frustration and ruin. “More” is always what we don't have. When we say

“more” will make us happy, then we destine ourselves to a life of misery, for we can never have “more.”

Paul describes this living in non-reality as becoming *futile in their speculations*. We end up living in an imaginary world of our own making, to our own destruction, leading to a failing of our own mental health—*their foolish heart was darkened*.

God turning us over to our sin natures is akin to the picture of God removing His protection and turning Israel over to the invading Babylonians, as referred to in Habakkuk 2:4 (quoted in the theme verse of Romans 1:16–17). God has given us His resurrection power to overcome sin, but if we decline to use that power and instead seek after our own self-orientation, God will judge us by removing His protection and giving us what we asked for. This will be articulated in the next section.

Biblical Text

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.