

Of sin, natural revelation, and the wrath of God (J. Peterson)
A Series on Sin: Part 2

1. What is God's wrath? Read Romans 1:18.

Is it like when a parent gets angry with a child, or like what you feel when someone cuts you off on the freeway?
Probably not!

God's wrath is His determination to punish sin. Our anger usually wants to inflict harm on someone or something. God's wrath ensures that there is a connection between sin and consequence. God's wrath ultimately shows His love.

Let's say you were driving down a lonely street late at night, and saw a defenseless older woman being attacked, but you felt nothing. You had no desire to right the wrong that was being done to her, or to deal with the thugs who were beating up on her. Your lack of wrath would really be a lack of love. Your "tolerance" of the behavior of the thugs would be totally unacceptable, and against all morality and reason.

By analogy, God likewise cannot be just and loving if He fails to exercise His wrath against sin.

Paul says that God's wrath is being revealed from heaven. He is talking about an on-going process, not something that happened once and is now over. We'll see in a moment how that wrath is being revealed.

The wrath is against all ungodliness and unrighteousness in men (and women!). These terms include all the sin against God and against others that we commit.

And look at how we are described, at the end of the verse. We are those who "suppress the truth in or by unrighteousness."

It's a funny thing about us, but we are quite capable of knowing things, but not admitting it. We are able to take a painful thought or experience or memory, and bury it beneath the surface, as if it never really happened. And yet, we know that it did, and so it pops up in strange and unexpected ways from time to time. Paul says that people bury the truth about God and His righteousness, because they are unrighteous.

2. Examine Romans 1:19-20. What do you observe here?

God has made Himself obvious to people's minds and hearts, both internally and externally, but they suppress this knowledge. The knowledge of God is not some hidden thing that only an elite few can discern. It is not something that only intellectuals can figure out. It is not open only to those who are naturally inclined to religious mysteries. It is not something hidden. It is "evident," Paul says. It's right out there, plain as your face. It's there for anyone to see. And it's so plain, because God shows it to us. So here's the implication: If it's really so plain and obvious, and people claim not to see it, ***the problem is not with God.***

When a student comes home with a D on an exam, it's not uncommon to hear how bad the teacher is! Right?
"Oh Dad, the teacher just rushed right through that part. Nobody in the class got it." Dad says, "But son, it's right here in the textbook." Son says, "Dad, you just wouldn't believe how bad that teacher is..." Dad's not buying it. He thinks the problem is with the student!

God says the problem is with the student!

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Any reasonable discussion about the existence of God has to deal with this: The Bible says that there is a moral, spiritual difficulty with accepting the reality of God. Not an *intellectual* difficulty, but a difficulty arising out of the bent of man's will and heart. That's what the words "in unrighteousness" mean at the end of verse 18. The existence of the true God is contrary to man's pattern of life. If we can't face up to that possibility, we are not prepared to deal with the evidence. We have buried it too deeply for us to even begin to be objective.

It's not that there aren't intellectual challenges for some people who are trying to figure out the existence of God. It's that the issue is lots bigger than just sorting out ideas and inferences. And if you pretend that it's just a matter of the intellect, you are really setting yourself above your humanity and deceiving yourself.

We often hear unbelievers say to us, or imply, something like this: "Well I suppose it's OK for you to believe in God. But it's really kind of a crutch, which I don't need. But whatever makes you happy...!" They clearly think we have made up a God to suit our emotional needs or weaknesses, and they are above that sort of thing. They think **we** are deceiving **ourselves**. I have to smile when I hear this, because the kind of God I believe in is hardly a crutch! In fact, I have never met anyone who would make up the kind of God I believe in!

Tell me, if you were to set about making up a god to serve as a crutch, would you make one who was unapproachably righteous and holy?! Would you make one who demanded absolute perfection from his worshippers? Would you have one who said, "Whoever looks upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart," or "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"?? I wouldn't!!

If I were making up a god, I would make one who didn't care very much if I did something wrong. I would make up one who thought I was a pretty nice person, who deserved to go to heaven just because I was so swell! I would want a god who was always around to serve my needs, provide for me, get me out of jams, never make any demands on me, and who would look the other way when I did something questionable. I would make up one whose gospel had no black or red pages! Now that would be a crutch... – but the real God of the Bible and the universe! No way!

You see, it's just the opposite of what unbelievers say. Man's desire is **not** that the personal holy Creator of the universe exist. Man's desire is that such a God **not** exist. And because of that desire, man has trouble with the plain evidence.

Verse 20 helps us understand what things are clear to all people, even though they repress the evidence. "From the creation of the world," Paul says, "God's eternal power and divine nature" have been clearly seen. So here it is: From creation itself, it's plain enough that there is a God and that He (that is, He as a *person*) is eternal and all-powerful. Other Bible passages add that you can see His providential government of the universe, and His goodness as well.

The theologians call this "natural" or "general" revelation. They mean by those words all that God reveals about Himself in a person's consciousness and in nature itself. (The other category is "special" revelation, which is all that God reveals about Himself through Jesus Christ and the Bible.)

Natural revelation, verse 20 says, is "clearly seen." It's not hidden. In fact, everyone knows it. (Do you see that, at the beginning of verse 21?) We can't plead ignorance. There's no excuse, it says at the end of the verse.

Do you know the little quip, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse?" Why isn't it an excuse? The law is not hidden and is not unknowable. It's just ignored, either through sloth or carelessness, or through deliberate disdain.

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You drive down the street at 45 mph. You pass a sign that says “30 mph.” The officer pulls you over, and you say, “But I didn’t *know* the speed limit was 30 mph.” What does the officer say? “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that you didn’t know the speed limit. I’m sorry I stopped you”? I don’t think so! I think the officer says, “That will cost you \$85.” He doesn’t care what you think you know or don’t know. The law has been made plain, and whether it was through inattention, or deliberate disobedience doesn’t matter a bit. There’s no excuse. Even if you didn’t know, you *should* have known, because it was made plain.

Natural revelation alone may not persuade people to believe in God, but the problem is not any insufficiency in the evidence. The problem is the insufficiency in men. It is a moral, not an intellectual problem, and certainly not a problem with the evidence. It *becomes* an intellectual problem because of our spiritual bias against the light. Remember what Jesus said in John 3? “The light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil.”

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