

# The letter to the **ROMANS**

Former Adventist Fellowship Bible Study

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## 3. Notes on Romans 1:18-23

Paul has just introduced the history-changing idea that “the righteous will live by faith.” Now he backs up and examines the hopeless, fallen condition of mankind. He establishes that their depravity results from their refusal to learn the truth about God from his revelation of himself in creation. Even without the special revelation given to the prophets and to Israel, the world has no excuse for refusing to acknowledge God.

### God’s Wrath

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,” Paul writes.

God’s wrath is certain. It will come against all those who refuse to follow Jesus and persist in living from the impulses of their darkened hearts. The apostle John declared that all who believe in the Son have life, but those who reject the Son will not see life. “God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36) In Revelation John continued the theme of God’s certain wrath against wickedness. In chapter 19, verses 11-15, he describes a white horse with a rider whose name is Faithful and True, the Word of God. He will come and rule “with an iron scepter”, and he will tread “the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.”

In his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians Paul approached the issue of God’s wrath from a slightly different perspective. He was writing to Gentile converts who were learning how to live as Christ-followers. He reminds them that

no one who is immoral, impure, or greedy has a place in the kingdom. Then he warns them not let anyone deceive them with “empty words” into rationalizing such ungodly behavior. It is because of the impure fruits of darkened hearts that God’s wrath is coming, he reminds them. (Ephesians 5:5-6) He echoed this warning to the church at Colossae as well. He urged them to “put to death” the behaviors that belong to the earthly nature; because of these things God’s wrath is coming. (Colossians 3:5-6)

The good news, however, is that we have a Savior who rescues from God’s wrath. Jesus, the one raised from the dead, the only one qualified to deal with sin and to save us from it, is the one who rescues us. (see 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10) Paul assures us that Jesus’ death and resurrection offer us protection against God’s wrath. If we’ve been justified by his blood, Paul argues, how much more will be saved from God’s wrath through Jesus? (Romans 5:9)

The belief many hold that God would not punish or destroy wicked, unrepentant people, that they would destroy themselves, is a heresy that denies the sovereign power of God. Wickedness and persistent unrepentance even when God calls and woos a person are sins that he cannot ignore. The Bible is clear that God’s wrath—not merely his disappointment or irritation—will destroy evil. His holiness cannot be in the presence of sin and evil, and his holiness will destroy evil. Even prior to the day of the Lord, when God’s wrath is poured out on the world, God’s wrath is still against evil.

God manifests his wrath by giving unrepentant people over to their stubborn hearts to do whatever their own desires impell them to do. (Psalm 81:11-12) As a result of their refusing to

acknowledge his power, he lets them reap the consequences of their depraved minds and shameful lusts. Because they have lost their spiritual sensitivity, he turns them over to all sensuality to indulge in impurity. (Ephesians 4:19) His wrath against sin allows people to suffer from their impure choices. As long as they suppress the truth and remain in their wickedness, God allows them to induce suffering in themselves as a means of finally waking them up to the reality of God's sovereignty and their need of him.

The paradox is that God's wrath cannot be separated from God's love. In his love, God allows his wrath against sin to bring discipline into the lives of his people. He points out sin and disobedience and clarifies righteousness—the righteousness that is by faith. Similarly, God's love is patient with the wicked. God doesn't destroy the disobedient without revealing himself and his forgiveness to them. He pleads with people to accept him and gives them repeated opportunities to embrace his grace.

## The Heavens Declare

In verse 21 Paul states that since creation God's invisible qualities have been clearly seen in what he has made. This clarity is significant enough that no one has an excuse to say they knew nothing of the true God. Scripture elsewhere supports this amazing declaration that nature itself proclaims the truth about God.

The gifts of nature are gifts from God to humanity. Jesus stated in Matthew 5:45 that the Father causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on both the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous. Further, when Paul was speaking to the crowds as Lystra he declared that although God let the nations go their own ways, he did provide a testimony of himself: in his kindness he provides rain, crops in their seasons, plenty of food and joy in human hearts. These things, Paul says, are evidences of the true God which even the pagan Gentiles, such as those to whom he was speaking, could grasp. (Acts 14:16-17)

Job, who predated Moses and is thought to have possibly been a contemporary of Abraham, understood that God provided the gifts that sustained life. In Job 5:9-10 he states that God sends rain to the earth and water to the countryside. He does wonders that cannot be fathomed and performs more miracles than can be counted. In his recording of the law in the Pentateuch, Moses also wrote that if Israel honored God's covenant with them, He would send them spring and autumn rains so they could have good harvests. (Deuteronomy 11:13-14) King David later wrote that God cares for the land, waters it, and enriches it abundantly. He drenches the earth's furrows, levels its ridges, softens it with showers, and blesses its crops. He crowns the year with bounty, overflows the grasslands and clothes the hill with grass, and covers the meadows with flocks. (Psalm 65:9-13) Further, David wrote, God fills his heart with joy and keeps him in safety so he can sleep in peace.

Throughout the millennia of time, the blessings of nature have proclaimed the love and care of the Creator. Even those who did not have the prophetic revelations of God had evidence

that pointed them to him. By providing everything from rain to crops to herds of livestock to safety to joy in the heart, God has always made himself known to all men.

In this passage of Romans Paul states that God's divine nature and eternal power have been clearly seen through what has been created. The rain, crops, and sunshine are gifts from God. In a more transcendent way, however, the heavens speak of God's eternity and divinity. In Psalm 19 David paints a provocative picture of the heavens expressing divine truth. He personifies the heavens and describes them declaring God's glory and proclaiming the work of his hand. The daytime pours forth speech, and the nights display knowledge. The voice and words of the heavens, he says, go to all the earth.

The majesty of the stars, constellations, sun and moon suggest a power much greater than any on earth, one greater even than the heavens themselves. Some people, in fact, have suggested that the salvation story is told in the constellations and that prehistoric people would have recognized the promise of a Savior in them. Whether or not this speculation is true, the majesty, order, and power of the sun and the night sky declare the presence of an even more powerful Creator.

The darkened hearts of wicked humans, however, have suppressed this knowledge and speech of the heavens, and the innate knowledge of God stated clearly in creation has been ignored for millennia.

## Darkened Hearts

Many people question the fact that human hearts are naturally darkened. They prefer to believe that humans are born basically good and "go bad" as they grow up. The Bible, however, explains that all men are born into sin. "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive," Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:22. The natural state of humanity since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden is the state of darkened hearts. After the flood when Noah offered sacrifices to God, God's response was that he would never again "curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood." (Genesis 8:21) This heart darkness has caused human misery ever since our parents were driven from Eden.

In Jeremiah God asks rhetorically, "What fault did your fathers find in me that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves." (Jeremiah 2:5) Later Jeremiah declared, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond all cure; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

This natural, desperate condition of the human heart underscores the powerful significance of Jeremiah's later prophecy that God would make a new covenant with his people and "put [his] law in their minds and write in on their hearts." (Jeremiah 31:33)

Paul expands on the subject of darkened hearts in the book of Ephesians. "You were dead in your...sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in

those who are disobedient,” he says in chapter 2:1-2. The Gentiles, he says a bit later, are “darkened in their understanding” and “separated from the life of God” because of their ignorance which resulted from the hardening of their hearts. (Ephesians 4:17-18)

Adam and Eve’s sin disconnected us from God and caused us all to be born sinful. God, however, gave the world a body of compelling evidence that would testify of him, calling people out of their spiritual lethargy back to a relationship with him. On the whole, however, people ignored the witness of creation and wallowed instead in the darkness generated by their sinful, disconnected hearts. Refusing the evidence of God when it was clearly before them caused people to become even more rigidly self-centered. They missed the “life of God” and spun deeply into wickedness.

Darkened hearts are foolish hearts (v. 21) According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, 2, and 3, foolishness can be equated with worldly wisdom. Spiritual truths and life lived by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit make no sense to hearts darkened by wickedness. Yet from an eternal perspective, the wisdom of philosophy and science and academia and even individual logic are futile and pointless unless they are enlightened with Biblical truth. True fools are afraid to live their lives according to principles of integrity and consequences. Instead they use their cleverness and logic to scheme the outcomes they want from their life situations. Such scheming almost always yields destructive results because it was done without the discipline of submitting to the will of God.

## The Glory of the Lord

Because of their foolish, darkened hearts, people “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” (v. 22)

God’s glory is proclaimed from the beginning to the end of the Bible. In Deuteronomy 4:23-24, God warned Israel through Moses not to forget their covenant with Him. “The Lord your God is a consuming fire” and “a jealous God”, he reminded them. Isaiah records that when God was testing Israel he said, “I do this for my own sake...How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another.” (Isaiah 48:11) Again in Isaiah 42:8 he says, “I am the Lord ...I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.”

God’s glory is unique to him. He is the I AM—He is real. Idols and other gods are counterfeits. They are created objects camouflaging evil spirits. When people turn away from God and worship idols, they are turning away from the inherent glory of the Creator and giving homage to a mirage. God will not share his glory with anyone or anything other than himself. He is God above all, the Creator of everything. He alone has inherent glory, and he alone is worthy of praise.

Isaiah painted a word picture which helps us see the majesty and sovereignty of God. “I saw the Lord seated on the throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.” (Is.6:1) Ezekiel was even more descriptive; he saw a throne of

sapphire and a man who, from the waist up, looked like metal full of fire and from the waist down looked like fire. A brilliant light surrounded this man, and the radiance of it he likened to a rainbow on a rainy day. (Ezekiel 1:25-28)

Revelation repeatedly describes the homage and majesty surrounding the throne of God. Revelation 4:8-11 describes four living creatures and 24 elders worshiping and giving glory to God, the creator of all things. Rev. 5:11-14 further shows “thousands upon thousands of angels” encircling the throne and singing, “Worthy is the Lamb” to receive power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and praise. Revelation 6:10 tells of the souls of the martyrs calling to God from under the altar saying, “How long, Lord, until you avenge our blood?” In Revelation 7:10-11 is a picture of a great multitude from every tribe, nation, people, and language saying, “Salvation belongs to our God...and to the Lamb.” All the angels are around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures, and they fall on their faces and worship God saying, “Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever!”

God’s glory is innate in him, and he deserves worship, praise, and honor from all his creatures. His glory is part of his sovereignty and eternity; it is not something we bestow on him as we bestow honor and glory on a human leader or hero. His glory belongs to him, and our response as his creatures is to recognize it and honor him because of who he is. If we refuse to honor or acknowledge his glory, it does not diminish. We cannot subtract it from him by glorifying a substitute god or creature. Instead, his glory becomes something of which we become justifiably afraid if we refuse to honor him.

His glory is what the heavens speak; it’s the evidence of his divine and eternal qualities that nature reflects. His glory is what the Gentiles could perceive before God’s special revelation of himself, and his glory is what those with darkened, wicked hearts rejected. Instead of allowing God’s glory to reveal God, the wicked attributed it to creation itself. They rejected God’s glory and compounded the darkness of their own minds and spirits.

People who do not honor God and give him the glory He is due will ultimately face his glory in a way they will not be able to avoid. “Worship God with reverence and love,” the author of Hebrews says in chapter 12 verse 28, “for our God is a consuming fire.” God’s glory will not tolerate eternal, unrepentant sin. It is God’s glory, the surpassing awesomeness of His power and perfection and love, that ultimately destroys sin. God is the source of creation, mercy, grace, and also justice, vengeance, and wrath. Everything in creation—including the giving and taking of existence—is within God’s sovereign rule.

## Commitment

God is calling you to submit to him the pockets of your mind and life that still spring from darkness. In his love God will allow your unrepentant or even unrecognized sins to take their natural course in your life until you surrender them to him. The

hardships and struggles you endure are His discipline which he administers to you as His loved son or daughter. God is asking you to allow his glory to shine the light of truth into the corners of your memory and your experience and to illuminate the dark places with His own presence.

Ask God to reveal to you how he wants you to grow, what he wants you to know, and what he wants you to surrender to him. The sovereign God of glory, the creator of the universe,

has called you to be his own, and he will give you his power to transform you into his own likeness.

Praise God for being truly sovereign, for being Lord of Creation and also of destruction. Praise Jesus for redeeming us from sin so we do not have experience the wrath of God. Praise the Holy Spirit for giving us a new birth into the family of God and making us eternally His children.