

GOD'S DAY OF WRATH
ROMANS 2:5

We like to celebrate special days and holidays. So each week we remember the work of Christ for us on Sunday. And of course in a few weeks there is Easter and we just finished Christmas. And we also like a few lesser known holidays, like President's Day and April Fool's Day. And then there are the really obscure special days: a couple of weeks ago I turned the page on my daily calendar to discover that day was "Chili Day" and I was exhorted to go home and make a pot of chili for dinner.

So if I were to ask you what day today is, your natural reaction might be to say, "It's Sunday." And that's correct. But did you also know that it's "White Chocolate Cheesecake Day" and "Frozen Food Day" (inaugurated by President Reagan in 1984)? And Tuesday may be Keith's birthday, but it's also "Proofreading Day" and "Organize Your Home Office Day" and "International Women's Day" and "Peanut Cluster Day." And yesterday was "Cheese Doodle Day." I took a few minutes Friday morning to discover these things, but I quit when I came across the fact that Thursday was "What If Cats and Dogs Had Opposable Thumbs Day" and I was being encouraged to think about and celebrate my dog and cat.

I figured most days had some special recognition, but finding just how commercial and ridiculous it became with 4-8 "special" events attached to each day surprised me.

I was thinking about all those days because there is a day most people refuse to think about. It is the Day of the Lord, or as Paul calls it in Romans 2:5 — the day of the wrath of the Lord. There is not only the general judgment of God that Paul speaks of in 1:18, but there is one climactic special day of God's wrath.

THERE WILL BE A FINAL JUDGMENT WHEN ALL UNRIGHTEOUS MEN WILL BE CONDEMNED.

In this verse there are three realities about God's final judgment — and all people must consider it:

1. The **INEVITABILITY** of Final Judgment (v. 5b)
2. The **FAIRNESS** of Final Judgment (v. 5a)
3. The **NATURE** of Final Judgment (v. 5c)

1. The **INEVITABILITY** of Final Judgment (v. 5b)

- Paul is writing in v. 5 about the **day of wrath**. That is not a common term in Scripture; it's only used about 4x and this is the only time Paul uses it in any of his 13 letters.
 - ✓ Paul uses other phrases to speak of particular days related to God's work: "the day," "the day of our Lord Jesus," "the day of redemption," "the day of Christ Jesus," "the day of Christ," "the day of the Lord," "this day," "the day he comes," and "that day." These all refer to some future event related to the last times — typically either His second coming or eternity or a day of judgment.
 - ✓ What Paul seems very clearly to be doing in this passage is making a distinction between God's general wrath (1:18) and a more specific wrath of God.
 - ✓ What Paul is likely doing is drawing allusion to the OT concept of the Day of the Lord.
 - In the OT, the day of the Lord could refer to local, near-term judgments:
 - ... the Assyrian captivity of Israel (Amos 5:16-20)
 - ... the Babylonian exile of Judah (Is. 13:1-6; Ezk. 13:5; Joel 1:15)
 - In the OT, the day of the Lord could refer to a distant, ultimate judgment of God:
 - ... the judgment of God against Babylon and the world in the tribulation (Is. 13:6-16)
 - ... the wrath of God coming suddenly and unexpectedly during "peace" (1 Thess. 5:1-3) — a likely reference to the tribulation following the rapture of the church (also 2 Thess. 2:1-4)
 - Many of the OT references to the Day of the Lord had both near (for Israel) and far (in last times) implications (e.g., Is. 13:6 and 13:9; Zeph. 1:7, 14). One commentator summarizes:

One of the tasks of the prophets was to insist that in fact "the day of the Lord" would be a day on which God would vindicate "His *own righteousness*" not only against the enemies of Israel, but also against Israel itself. This "day of the Lord" throughout Old Testament prophecy remains a future reality, though there were events within the history covered by the Old Testament story which were indeed days of judgment both upon Israel and upon the surrounding nations which had oppressed her. [Tasker; quoted by Mayhue, *TMS*], 22:1, 67.]

- ✓ In addition, Paul seems to be referring to the same event when he mentions "the day when...God will judge the secrets of men" (v. 16). That clearly appears to be God's final judgment against sinners.
- ✓ That seems to make clear that Paul almost certainly had the Day of the Lord in mind when he used this phrase and because he was looking particularly forward to a specific day of wrath, it is best to see this judgment as the judgment of the Great White Throne (**Rev. 20:11-15**). The emphasis:
 - Everyone will be judged (***the dead, the great and the small***, v. 12) — and according to deeds
 - The certainty of the judgment (***the sea...death and Hades gave up the dead...everyone of them***, v. 13); no one will escape the judgment.
 - The exclusivity and finality of it (***anyone's name not found...***, v. 15)

- The end of that final judgment is Hell. We do well to at least think briefly about what the consequence of unrepentant sin is:
 - ✓ It is both the absence and presence of Christ — absence from His joyful presence, but present in His eternal wrath and judgment (Rev. 14:10).
 - ✓ It is unrelenting torment and pain (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Rev. 20:14).
 - ✓ It is darkness — both physical and spiritual (Mt. 8:12).
 - ✓ It is total solitude and loneliness (the only company is one's convicting thoughts, 2 Pt. 2:4)
 - ✓ It is a place of eternal restlessness (Rev. 14:11)
 - ✓ It is the fulness of all evil and sin — there will be no restraint and nothing good (Jude 13; Rev. 9).
 - ✓ This is the end for all who believe they are righteous without Christ — ***the day of wrath***.

"There is no way to describe hell. Nothing on earth can compare with it. No living person has any real idea of it. No madman in wildest flights of insanity ever beheld its horror. No man in delirium ever pictured a place so utterly terrible as this. No nightmare racing across a fevered mind ever produces a terror to match that of the mildest hell. No murder scene with splashed blood and oozing wound ever suggested revulsion that could touch the borderlands of hell. Let the most gifted writer exhaust his skill in describing this roaring cavern of unending flame, and he would not even brush in fancy the nearest edge of hell." [Mack, *Fight...*, 54f]

- What is important to remember in *this* context is that Paul is talking to those who don't think they will receive judgment because of their position as Israelites and members of the Abrahamic covenant.
 - ✓ That was not only an OT sentiment, but is seen clearly during Christ's ministry when the Pharisees frequently accused Christ of being outside the covenant and them within it (e.g., Jn. 8:39).
 - ✓ In the first century apocryphal book, *The Wisdom of Solomon* it says, "But you, our God, are kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin we are yours" (15:1-2). In other words, "we are acceptable and righteous to you because of who we are." That is the very issue Paul addresses in 2:1ff.
 - ✓ Paul is clearly stating that regardless of their position, if they are claiming their own righteousness as the reason that God won't judge them, they are self-condemned and under God's wrath.
 - ✓ One writer has appropriately said, "Many things might be said about that day, but one is certain that then God's settled opposition to evil will reach its consummation." [Morris, *Romans*, 115.]
 - ✓ This means God is not morally neutral against sin. Just because He has delayed judgment does not mean He will not judge. As v. 4 noted, His delay only means that He is being kind, patient, and gracious so that sinners will repent (2 Pt. 3:9). It doesn't mean judgment will be avoided.
 - ✓ There is a benefit for the believer in contemplating this final judgment:

When the heart no longer feels the truth of hell, the gospel passes from good news to simply news. The intensity of joy is blunted, and the heart-spring of love is dried up....

...But if I remember these horrible things and do believe them in my heart; if I let every remaining sin and every moment of indifference to spiritual things remind me of the smell of hell lingering in the remnants of my corruption; if I let my knees become weak as on the day when I tottered on the cliff of my doom; if I recall that, apart from absolutely free grace, I would be the most hardened sinner and now in the torments of hell; if all this I remember and believe in my heart, then, oh, what a contrition, what a lowliness, what a meekness will be effected in my heart. [Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 116.]

- Final judgment is inevitable. That's the first thing Paul would have us know about that judgment.

2. **The FAIRNESS of Final Judgment (v. 5a)** — we want to address two questions about God's fairness.

- **Why does this judgment come?** Is God just unfair in judging? (Most say He is.)
 - ✓ God's final wrath is **because of the stubbornness and unrepentant heart** of unbelievers.
 - ✓ In v. 4, God is said in three different ways to be kind: **kind, tolerant, and patient**. And God's delay in His wrath is for one reason: to bring about **repentance**.
 - ✓ But instead of repentance, these self-righteous Jews (and it applies to many in many churches today as well), presume they are good without Christ, so they don't repent of their sin. Their stubbornness is in contrast to the kindness of God.
 - ✓ In fact, the word **stubborn** is the word "sclerosis" and means "hardness" (like the current "arterial sclerosis"). As MacArthur has noted, "Hardening of the arteries may take a person to the grave, but hardening of his spiritual heart will take him to hell." [*Romans 1-8*, 120.]
 - ✓ When Scripture talks about a hardened man, it refers to an inclination to sin and evil that is so strong that it controls the entire being of the man; he is incapable of seeing his self-deception and repenting. He is enslaved to sin and never would or could repent. [Haldane, 87] Cf. Ez. 36:26.
 - ✓ We see that the hardened person doesn't repent in the next phrase: **unrepentant heart**.
 - This is the person who is unwilling to confess his sin and acknowledge his rebellious actions (contra Pss. 32, 51). This person is guilty (culpable) of sin and is unwilling to confess it to God.
 - God has given him time to repent (v. 4) and he has continued to embrace his sin and continued to reject God and his need for repentance.
 - ✓ Why does God's judgment come? Because these men are not righteous and God cannot and will not endure sin in His presence.
 - These men have failed to see the greatness of God's holiness and the horror of their sin.
 - The penalty for the first act of rebellion was capital punishment (Gen. 2:17; 3:19). So every sin is a capital offense; God must enact the death penalty and every day He delays is grace.
 - "The crucial question is not, 'why do certain people suffer or die?' but 'why does anyone live?'" [MacArthur, 122-3.]

There is a second question about God's fairness —

- **How does this judgment come?**

- ✓ My translation of 2:5 says, *"Because of your stubbornness..."* A better translation might be something like, *"According to your stubbornness..."* In other words, in proportion to the stubbornness and unrepentance, the rebellious sinner will be judged. However hardened he is against God, that much he will be judged.
- ✓ Paul reinforces that principle when he says, ***you are storing up wrath for yourself...***
 - The word "store up" is generally used in a positive way in the NT — it refers to storing up treasures and rewards (**Mt. 6:19-20**; 1 Cor. 16:2).
 - The sense of the practice is that little bit by little bit, there is an increased "reward" that is being put away. So the sense is that they are not accumulating God's wrath by one action, but that by their ongoing sinful behavior and lack of repentance they are increasing their condemnation and adding to the wrath of God. Their sins will be judged by their accumulation.

"There are various degrees of punishment in hell because hell is where God manifests his perfect justice, and the punishment always fits the crime. If someone commits thirty sins, he is going to be punished thirty ways. *So long as our hearts remain hardened, we add to the indictment moment by moment.*" [Sproul, *Romans*, my emphasis.]

- And Paul emphasizes that it is the action of the sinner that is accumulating this wrath — ***you...for yourself***. His condemnation is the result of his sin and his rebellion alone; it could have been avoided. Wrath is being accumulated like water behind a dam with the only restraint being God's (temporary) tolerance and patience.
- ✓ There will be no leniency for anyone in Hell; all will receive capital punishment for their capital sins. Yet some will be judged more harshly than others because of the severity of their rebellion.
- ✓ This is a profound warning to sinners; you not only are not sinning with impunity, but the more you sin the worse your judgment will be. The more you reject God and assert your independence from Him, the greater your condemnation will be.
- ✓ This is also a profound comfort to believers. There is so much wrong in our world. Sin is so pervasive and we see so many who appear to "get away" with sin. Be comforted that God is an exacting God and every sin will be punished appropriately and accordingly.
- ✓ How does God's judgment come? It comes in deserved proportion to the sin of the sinner.
- ✓ God will have the final word on the final day of His wrath against sin, and it will be fair.

3. The **NATURE** of Final Judgment (v. 5c)

- Paul will say one more thing about the wrath of God in this verse; the word **and** after **day of wrath** serves as an explanation of what that day is like. Paul is talking about one, not two different events.
- And what Paul says about God's day of wrath is that it is on that day that God's **righteous judgment** will be **revealed**.
 - ✓ God is righteous, and to this point, we have not seen all the implications of what that righteousness is like, but on that day, we will see even more of just how righteous Christ is.
 - ✓ What God punishes on that day will be right. It will be in accordance with His truth (v. 2). There is nothing immoral, wrong, or unfair about God's judgment. It is right in every dimension.

"Every time you think of God's reprobation, you also think of the infinite, true sinfulness that those who perish are guilty of and the judgment that is really deserved....This one thing stands for certain in Scripture, 'that every mouth will be closed, and all the world will become accountable to God' (Romans 3:19)." [Piper, *A Godward Life*, 2: 274.]

- But one writer also notes another factor in connection with this judgment: the day is not a day only of the judgment of the wicked to Hell, but "The day of wrath for the wicked is one in which the aspirations of the righteous will be realized and they will be given glory, honour, and peace (vss. 7, 10)." [Murray, *Romans*, 62.]
 - ✓ This is what Jesus spoke of in **Mt. 25:31-34, 41, 46**.
 - ✓ For the unbeliever, there is a realization of the horror of his sin on that day; for the believer, there is the realization of the grace of Christ in our final redemption.
 - ✓ We have been speaking of God's final judgment of sinners in his final wrath at the Great White Throne. Let me be perfectly clear: this is *not* a judgment for any believer. If you are trusting in Christ for your salvation, you have been freed from this judgment; it is not in your future.

Wrath comes not on those who sin, but on those who sin and habitually will not repent ('your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart'). We must not misunderstand this — as those with sensitive consciences are likely to do — to mean that my security is only as strong as my most recent repentance, or that every time I sin, I place myself in danger of hell until I repent (because I fear that if I die with any unconfessed sin I will be condemned). That misunderstanding would be clearly contrary to the gospel of grace which Paul expounds so wonderfully in this letter (especially 8:28-39). *Paul is not condemning shaky discipleship, but complacent and persistent hypocrisy*, the pseudo-discipleship that thinks the need for repentance ended with my 'conversion.' *What Paul wants to expose is not the life that sometimes falls into sin (and therefore needs repentance as an ongoing discipline), but rather the hard and impenitent heart that systematically will not repent.* Paul speaks not to the penitent heart that lacks assurance, but to the impenitent heart that has a false assurance. [Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 95-6; my emphasis.]

CONCLUSION: Some lessons to take away from a sermon on God's final judgment and Hell:

1. If you are a believer, one of the tensions about living in this world is there are so many things that are not right. Laws are immoral; judges are corrupt; unrighteousness is approved and encouraged. What is wrong is said to be right and what is right is said to be wrong. We get discouraged fighting for basic (what should be self-evident) morality and truth. Hear this. For five or 20 or 60 years of your life you will have to endure evil and corruption and immorality. And then one day there will be a judgment and every rebellion will forever be put down. Forever. From the moment that the gavel of God comes down for the last time, there will never again be corruption, but truth will always reign and rule. From that moment, for 60 and then 600 and then 6000 and then 600,000 years Christ will rule with truth and righteousness (and those are just the first years of eternity). What we are enduring is brief and short and what we will have is eternal and great. Do not despair. Christ wins. Christ has won. (Cf. Ps. 37:7-9; Rev. 19:11-16; 21:5-11.)
2. If you are a believer, you and I have friends and family who are facing this wrath. God is just in His wrath and we should rejoice in and honor Him for that. But the horror of what is ahead for God-rejecters should grieve our hearts. Jesus wept over the effects of sin (Jn. 11:48), and lamented the rebellion of unrighteous Israel (Lk. 10:13) and did not hesitate to call all men to repentance (Lk. 13:5). We should do the same: grieve over the rebellion of the lost and work for their salvation.
3. If you are not a follower of Jesus Christ, stop letting your self-righteousness and pride keep you from repenting. God hasn't overlooked or forgotten about you. He is as aware of you as if you were the only person in the universe. He has His eyes squarely on you and you will not escape His wrath. Do you think you will escape from the One who is everywhere and knows everything (v. 3)? You will not. So turn away from your sin and turn to Christ. Confess and repent of your sin and become obedient to Christ.

BENEDICTION: Revelation 22:16-17, 20-21.