

## Lesson 17 at StudyRomans.org

### Romans 1:17, Continued

**Romans 1:17** — For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Why did Paul quote Habakkuk 2:4 here in Romans 1:17?

I think it is because Habakkuk 2:4 shows us that faith has always been the path to God, even in the Old Testament. God wants people who trust him completely and who rely upon him completely, and we can be certain that God will be faithful to his word and to his promises.

And that beautiful truth about faith ties in perfectly with what Paul has told us so far in chapter 1 and with what Paul will tell us in the remainder of this letter.

The gospel is based on faith — both on our faith in God and on God’s faithfulness to his promises. And that faith is how we live — both how we can live eternally with God and how we must live in this world to be pleasing to God.

And all of that was explained by a Jewish prophet living under the Old Covenant. Were there perhaps some Gentiles in Rome who were surprised by that fact? Were they looking down on the Jews because they thought those Jews had come from a works-based system completely unrelated to faith? If so, those Gentiles were mistaken, and Paul proves that right here in verse 17 simply by quoting Habakkuk.

These are all themes that we will see later in this letter to the Romans, and so I think that these are all reasons why Paul quotes Habakkuk here in verse 17.

One final question about verse 17 — we have a working definition of faith, but do we need to refine our definition now that we have seen that word “faith” used three times in this one verse? Or are we still happy with our first attempt at a definition?

As a reminder, here is our working definition of faith: “faith” is reliance upon and trust in God.

I still think that definition is pretty good, but perhaps we could strengthen it a bit: “faith” is **complete** reliance **only** upon God and **complete** trust **only** in God. If that was not already clear from our earlier definition, then I think we should make it clear. We cannot trust or rely at all on the arm of man.

**Jeremiah 17:5** — Thus says the LORD: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.”

Can we find an example of that sort of faith outside of a religious context? Can we find an example where someone trusts in someone else completely and relies completely on someone else to the exclusion of all others? Can we find such an example of faith in someone else that we might be able to use as a model for our faith in God? I think we can, and I think Jesus tells us where to look.

**Luke 18:17** — Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

Isn't there a great similarity between the faith that an infant has in his earthly parents and the faith that a child of God has in his heavenly Father? Don't infants rely completely on their parents and trust their parents completely to care for them and to supply all that they need to live? And aren't we all supposed to have that same kind of faith in God? Isn't that what Jesus just told us?

**Luke 18:17** — Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

A baby lives because of his parents. And that fact is the link we need to find in that baby an example of the faith that we must have in God.

**John 6:57** — As the living Father sent me, **and I live because of the Father**, so whoever feeds on me, **he also will live because of me**.

A baby lives because of his parents. Jesus just said, "I live because of the Father." And Jesus also just said that we will live because of him. That is what John 6:57 tells us.

If we rely completely on God and trust completely in God, then we will obey everything that God tells us to do, including what God tells us to do to enter his kingdom and remain in his kingdom. That sort of faith is a saving faith; it is an obedient faith. When we trust in God, we do what God tells us to do. If we are disobeying God, then we are not trusting in God or relying on God, but instead we are trusting in ourselves.

So where are we when it comes to our working definition of faith? I think that elsewhere we find some other uses of the word "faith" (such as in Jude 3 — "contend for the faith"), but for now in this letter to the Romans, I think we can use this definition: "faith" is **complete**

reliance **only** upon God and **complete** trust **only** in God. That is how the righteous shall live by faith! That is an obedient faith. That is a saving faith. That is a living faith.

### **Introduction to Romans 1:18-3:20**

Most commentaries view verse 18 as the beginning of a major section of the letter that continues all the way until Romans 3:20. What is the purpose of this section, and what does it tell us about the theme of this letter?

Paul just told us that the gospel is God's power for salvation — that is, the gospel is the solution to our problem. But what is our problem? I think that is the main purpose of this section — to answer that question. What is our problem? Why do we need the gospel?

In short, our problem is that we are all sinners. And our problem is that if we received from God what we deserved, then what we received would be the wrath of God. That, in fact, is what the opening verse of this section tells us — “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”

And that fact is true of all mankind, and so we might expect Paul to speak here to all mankind as a single group given that we are all in the same boat. But Paul does not do that.

As we saw in verse 16, Paul once again speaks to the Jews and the Gentiles separately — at least in most of this section. We will consider soon whether Paul is addressing only the Gentiles in verse 18, and we know that Paul addresses everyone at the end of this section, when

he concludes that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But, for the most part, Paul starts with the Gentiles in the remainder of chapter 1, and then moves to the Jews in chapter 2.

Why? Why does Paul continue to address the Jews and the Gentiles separately in this letter to a city where there apparently was great tension and division between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church? Wouldn't it have been better to speak to them all only as a unified whole rather than separately?

I think we will see the answer to that question as we study this section. Paul's approach was the right approach because the Jews and the Greeks were coming from very different backgrounds — and that difference sometimes meant that they had to be addressed separately.

The Jews, no doubt, believed that their background was much superior to that of the Greeks. I suspect that when it came to the question of morality, the Jews were all looking down on those evil, sexually immoral, idolatrous Gentiles. And I suspect that when Paul started off with a condemnation of the Gentile world, most of the Jews were thinking, “preach on brother Paul! Those Gentiles are awful! Let them have it!” But, of course, Paul would very soon also let the Jews have it!

And there is a crucial lesson here for us — one that we absolutely must not miss as we begin our study of this section of Romans.

Very shortly we will be reading descriptions of terrible sin — people who suppress the truth, people who do not honor God, people who dishonor their bodies, people who worship creatures, people who practice homosexuality, people who are filled with all manner of

unrighteousness, people who approve of sin, and people who are foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.

Now, let me ask a question: what is the most common response in the church when someone reads or teaches from these verses in Romans 1? “Preach on, brother Paul! Those people are awful! Let them have it!”

But I’m sure we all see the problem with that response — it is, no doubt, the same response that the first century Jewish Christians had when they heard or read these same verses. And Paul will soon tell those Jews just how wrong they are to have had that response.

We, too, are wrong if we have that response. Yes, these sins listed in Romans 1 are horrible sins, but Paul’s point here is not to convince us that there are some really bad people out there. Paul’s point here is just the opposite. Paul’s point is that we are all really bad people. “None is righteous, no, not one.”

So, as we read and study these verses, let’s not act as if we are reading about “those people” out there. We are reading about ourselves. We are reading about all mankind. After all, if this problem is not our problem, then why do we need the solution to this problem? Why do we need the gospel of Christ?

The answer, of course, is that the problem Paul is about to describe is most certainly our problem. This problem is everybody’s problem. And so we all, most certainly, need the solution to that problem, which is the gospel of Christ.

## **Romans 1:18**

**Romans 1:18** — For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

As with most verses that begin with a connecting word, our first question about verse 18 is how it relates to the prior verse. And what we find is that verse 18 is an explanation of the prior verse.

Why do the righteous live by faith in God? Verse 18 answers that question, and the answer we find in verse 18 is that faith in God is the only way for anyone to live. Absent faith in God, all that remains is the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. Absent the power of the gospel, there is no salvation for anyone.

And, I think what we will see is that this explanation is not limited to verse 18. I think what we will see is that this entire section is an explanation for verse 17. If anyone wants to live, the only way to do that is through faith in God. There is no other way. All other roads lead to death — and that is true for all people, whether Gentile or Jew.

The question we just answered was our first question about verse 18, but we still have other questions:

- What is the wrath of God?
- How is the wrath of God revealed?
- Who are the “men” being described in verse 18 — are they all people or are they just the Gentiles?

- Is there a difference between ungodliness and unrighteousness?
- How do the unrighteous suppress the truth?

Let's start with the first question on that list.

### **What is the wrath of God?**

In the previous verse, we looked at “the righteousness of God,” which is revealed in the gospel. Here in verse 18, we see “the wrath of God,” which is revealed from heaven. What is “the wrath of God”?

Let's start by looking at the five primary Greek words used in the New Testament to describe anger. Those words are shown on the Handout for Lesson 17 (at the bottom of the rightmost column), along with every verse in which those five Greek words are found.

- The first word on our list is the most common word, and it is actually two words — a verb and a noun. The noun (Strong's #3709) is used 36 times in the New Testament, and the verb (Strong's #3710) is used 8 times. The most common translations of this word are “anger” or “wrath” — either to possess it (the noun) or to experience it (the verb). As you can see from the yellow highlighting on the Handout, this Greek word is the word translated “wrath” in Romans 1:18. (And note also that, of the 44 times this word is used in the New Testament, 16 of them are found in Romans. It is definitely a key word in this letter!)
- The second word on our list has Strong's #2372 and is found 18 times in the Bible. It is highlighted in blue on the Handout, and it means rage or a passionate outburst.



- The third word on our list has Strong's #23 and is used 7 times in the Bible. It is highlighted in orange on the Handout, and it means indignation or moral outrage.
- The fourth word on our list has Strong's #3950 (purple). It is used only once in the Bible (Ephesians 4:26), and it means irritation or provocation.
- The final word on our list has Strong's #5520 (green). It is also used only once in the Bible (John 7:23), and it means to be embittered or filled with gall.

There are a few other words that we might have added to our list. For example, Strong's #454 (*anoia*) is translated "fury" in Luke 6:11 to describe madness expressing itself in rage — but I think for our purposes we can focus on the five Greek words shown on our Handout.

Before we look more closely at verse 18, let's see what lessons we can learn just from having all of these scriptures gathered together on the Handout for Lesson 17.

**Lesson #1: We need to consider all of the evidence.**

Whatever we conclude about the word "wrath" in verse 18, our conclusion, if it is to have any hope of being correct, will have to agree with everything the Bible says on the subject. If our conclusion is contradicted by even one verse in the Bible, then we know our conclusion is wrong.

That is why I like to do what I have done on this Handout — gather together all of the evidence and lay it all out on the table! That strategy

always served me very well as a lawyer, and I think it will also serve us very well as Bible students.

And I think a great deal of confusion in the religious world today can be traced to a failure to study the Bible this way. People find their favorite verse on some subject, and then they ignore or explain away all of the other verses on that same subject.

God's word is truth — and what that means is that no part of God's word contradicts any other part of it. That is what it means to be truth. The Bible is a unified whole. And what that means is that we must interpret each verse in light of all the other verses in the Bible. We know that they will all agree if we view them correctly — and if they don't agree, then we must not be viewing them correctly. Again, that is how truth works.

And so our first lesson from the Handout is that we must consider all of the evidence — and this Handout collects the evidence from the New Testament. (As for the Old Testament evidence, that is homework!)

**Lesson 2: These words are used to describe the anger of God, the anger of man, and the anger of Satan.**

- Here in Romans 1:18, the word translated “wrath” is describing the wrath of God — but that same Greek word is used to describe the wrath of man in Ephesians 4:31 and is used to describe the wrath of Satan in Revelation 12:17. We also see this same word used to describe the wrath of Christ in Mark 3:5 and Revelation 6:16.

- Our second word, meaning rage or a passionate outburst, is used in Ephesians 4:31 to describe the wrath of men. But that same Greek word is used in Romans 2:8 and Revelation 14:10 to describe the fury and the wrath of God. Also, we find that same Greek word used in Revelation 12:12 to describe the wrath of Satan.
- Our third word, meaning indignation or moral outrage, is used in Matthew 21:15 to describe the indignation of men. But that same Greek word is used in Mark 10:14 to describe the indignation of Christ.
- Our fourth and fifth words are each used only once in the Bible — each time to describe the anger of man.

And so what can we conclude from all of that? I think one thing we can conclude is that there is such a thing as righteous anger. Of the five Greek words used in the Bible to describe anger, three of them are used to describe God's anger, which must be a righteous anger. So we know it exists.

And, likewise, we know that unrighteous anger exists because we see two of those five words used to describe the anger of Satan, and we see four of those five words used to describe the anger of man directed against God.

And so the question is not whether righteous anger exists. It does. The question is whether God wants us, his children, to ever have righteous anger.

Let's start with this question: Is the anger of man always unrighteous anger? I don't think so. I think Paul explains that elsewhere.

**Ephesians 4:26-27 — Be angry and do not sin;** do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

But is that statement “be angry” a command? Are we commanded to be angry? Or is that phrase instead an acknowledgment that anger is an emotion that is sometimes unavoidable?

I think it is the latter. I don't know how we can ever read Ephesians 4 and come away thinking that God has commanded us to be angry. Yes, Ephesians 4:26 says “be angry,” but let's read what Paul writes just a few verses later.

**Ephesians 4:31 — Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.**

That one verse includes both of the two most common Greek words used to describe anger — and it tells us to put them all away from ourselves. Yes, the word used is “all” — all wrath and all anger. Let all of it be put away from you.

Yes, anger is an emotion. And, yes, sometimes that emotion will be triggered in us whether we want it to or not. But how do we respond? How does God want us to respond? Are we to feed that anger so that it grows, or are we to put it away from us? Paul just answered that question. Let them all be put away from you.

And so, yes, there is such a thing as righteous anger, but there is also such a thing as righteous vengeance — and we know that righteous vengeance is something reserved only for God.

**Romans 12:19** — Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the **wrath** of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

And did you catch it? “But leave it to the **wrath** of God.” We see both righteous vengeance and righteous wrath in Romans 12:19. And I think righteous wrath is like righteous vengeance. Yes, they exist, but they are reserved for God.

God does not want us to be an angry people. God wants us to be a joyful people. “Rejoice always” (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

But can we really do that? After all, the entire world of social media and 24-hour news has one purpose in mind — to make us angry! To make us click! To make us respond! To make us stir things up! That is how they make money. That is how they make their content go viral. That is how they keep people interested.

Here is how Jonathan Turley described the situation in his recent book:

We are living in an age of rage. It permeates every aspect of our society and politics. Rage is liberating, even addictive. It allows us to say and do things that we would ordinarily avoid, even denounce in others. Rage is often found at the furthest extreme of reason. For those who agree with the underlying message, it is righteous and passionate. For those who disagree, it is dangerous and destabilizing.

An age of rage! Is there a better description of our modern society than that? And what does God want his people to do? Should we join in with all that rage? Should we fill ourselves to the brim with righteous wrath? I think we all know the answer to that question — no!

In the great Messianic Second Psalm, when God describes the nations of the world that have set themselves against his Anointed King, how does God describe them?

**Psalm 2:1** — Why do the nations rage?...

And the nations of the world are still raging today — three thousand years later! We see that terrible raging anger all around us today.

But what is God's will for his own people? What is God's will for his own holy nation (1 Peter 2:9)? What is God's will for his church? Does he want us to be raging like all of the other nations of the world? Does he want us to be filled with anger like everybody else? No, he does not. God wants us to be different from all those other nations.

**James 1:19-20** — Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; **for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.**

The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. That is what the Bible says about our modern age of rage. The rage of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

But what does produce the righteousness of God? Paul just told us that in the previous verse: "For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith" (Romans 1:17).

The power of God for salvation is the gospel. Our anger cannot save anyone. The solution to the problems of this world is not our rage — the solution to the problems of this world is God's gospel!

And, yes, we sometimes get angry. And yes, that initial flash of anger may not itself be a sin. But it is very close to being a sin. Isn't that what Paul just told us?

**Ephesians 4:26-27** — Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, **and give no opportunity to the devil.**

I think that verse is telling us that Satan smiles whenever we get angry. Why? Because Satan knows that our anger is his opportunity — our anger is his best moment to strike. And if we are angry all the time, we are likely sinning *most* of the time.

### **Lesson 3: God experiences wrath, anger, and indignation.**

Does God really experience the emotion of anger? Or, instead, are these verses just describing some sort of judicial wrath that is carried out absent emotion as some suggest?

Some commentaries recoil from the thought that God could ever experience the emotion of anger, but if we try to explain away the wrath of God, what do we do with the love of God? Should we also try to explain that away? If God's wrath isn't really wrath, then is God's love not really love?

And maybe that question provides us with a good starting point. Are the wrath of God and the love of God linked in some way? Think again about what we find in John 3.

**John 3:16** — For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

**John 3:36** — Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, **but the wrath of God remains on him.**

Those verses tell us two very important things about everyone in the world. First, God loves everyone in the world (John 3:16). But, second, absent obedience to the gospel, the wrath of God remains on everyone in the world (John 3:36).

I think the answer is that the love of God explains the wrath of God. If God had his way, everyone would obey the gospel and be saved. We know that is the will of God (2 Peter 3:9). But there is something standing between what God wants and what God gets — and that something is the human heart. Don't we see that in Mark 3?

**Mark 3:5** — And he (Jesus) looked around at them with anger, grieved at their **hardness of heart...**

Why was Jesus angry? Because he was grieved at their hardness of heart. What made Jesus angry at them was their stubbornness, their rebellion, and their hardness of heart.

The reason we need the gospel of God is because of the wrath of God. And we should thank God every day that the wrath of God is not our only option. Instead, we can obey the gospel and be given the righteousness of God so that we will never experience the wrath of God. That, in fact, is the good news — that we need not ever experience the bad news!



Let's move on to our next question. Earlier, in verse 17, we looked at how the righteousness of God is revealed. Verse 18 likewise tells us that the wrath of God is revealed. But how?

### **How is the wrath of God revealed?**

Is this revealed wrath of God the final day of judgment? Yes, at least in part. The wrath of God is coming on that final day.

**Colossians 3:6** — On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

Paul will refer to this final day as the day of wrath in Romans 2:5. And so, likewise, I think the wrath of God here in verse 18 **includes** that final day, but I do not think we should limit it to just that day.

Why not? Because the verb here is in the present tense — this wrath of God is being revealed. I think there must be some way in which the wrath of God was being revealed to the people of Paul's day. But how? I think the first chapter of Romans answers that question.