

The wrath of God - objections and answers

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Preacher: Miles Tradewell

[0:00] On the same page, as it were. I'm not actually sure what the page is of the Pew Bibles, but I'm sure someone can find it.! He's not ashamed because this message is the power of God to save people. It's the only way that people get right with God.

And as we saw in the rest of the passage, this is our desperate need. So if we pick up in verse 18, because really we're going to focus on that main chunk. It's probably got a little subheading in your Bibles.

I'm going to read from verse 18 down and just illustrate as we go through what we talked about this morning. So we've got a bit of context for our discussion this evening. So, verse 18 says, The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power, His divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. We saw that what Paul is saying here is that all of us are on the receiving end of God's wrath, His right response, His judgment of human evil in the world.

[1:38] And the problem deep down isn't a behavioural thing. It's not what we do or don't do at heart. The deep problem is that everyone has suppressed the knowledge of God. Although we should see quite clearly from the world around us, from our bodies, from the beauty of the world, from the incredible creation in which we live, that there is a God.

It should be obvious to us that there's someone there with divine nature and with great power who's made all of this, but we suppress it. I use the sort of illustration of pushing God into the next room and closing the door and bolting the door and barricading the door with ideologies and theories and all kinds of distractions.

And this is the heart of it, really, pushing God out of our lives. And this is what everyone really all around us does, us included. This has been how every human being has been ever since the beginning in our natural state.

So that's the problem that Paul addresses here. And because people are bound to worship, because we're hardwired to worship, look what happens next in verse 21. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles.

[2:55] As human beings, although we have pushed God out of the picture, we continue to worship. And so we see here how people turn to worship whatever's left.

The creator is gone, the immortal is gone. So all that we're left with is the created and the mortal. And so we turn to that, to worship that. And human beings have done this in more sophisticated ways, in more primal ways, all the way through history.

We do it today. Most of the idols, if you like, in our modern society are things which are far more subtle, like money and success and sexual gratification.

Those sort of things are the things which we go after, but still created things, not the creator. And so the result of this is that God's wrath falls. But we discovered this morning that the wrath that is being spoken about in this chapter isn't really the future wrath.

I mean, the Bible talks about judgment that is coming. It certainly does an awful lot. But here, in verse 18, actually, right at the top, you can see that God's wrath is being described in the present tense. It's being described as the wrath that is being revealed right now from heaven.

[3:59] And in verse 24, we understand a little bit more about what that means. What does this look like? Well, there's those four simple words there. God gave them over. God gave them over.

Because actually, worshipping anything other than God is a destructive path to take. When God calls us and we resist, when we push God out of our lives, God gives us over to live out the desires that we choose.

To live out that destructive path that we've chosen for ourselves. And so Paul then goes on to illustrate that with, as I said, some of the most explosive and kind of controversial verses you'll find in the New Testament.

Verse 24. Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity, sorry, for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served creative things rather than the creator who is to be praised.

Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.

[5:12] Men committed shameful acts with one another and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. So this, as I said, is explosive stuff in any major city around the country probably today.

In most of the towns and villages as well. But what we looked at is why Paul chooses the issue of homosexual behavior. Why does he choose homosexual practice as the issue here?

He could have picked any number of sins to illustrate his point. His point seems to be that when you decide to push God out of your heart, you begin to worship creative things instead of the creator.

And this opens the floodgates to all kinds of attitudes and behavior that spill out from our hearts.

And the reason I think he picks homosexual behavior as his example here is because it works as a double illustration.

Do you remember I was saying this this morning? It illustrates an example of sin. And there could have been multiple examples. Other sexual sins like adultery or whatever else it might be. Or other things like greed or theft or gluttony.

[6:13] I mean, he could have picked anything that illustrates the way that our hearts desire and our worship spills over into sin. But he goes further. Sorry, this goes further. He chooses this example because it works as a double illustration.

Not only is it an illustration of sinful behavior, but it's also an illustration of the very nature of sin. You see, in the same way that human beings have turned away from the creator, what is other than them, towards something that is the same, the created.

He's saying here in homosexuality, it's almost like an analogy of this. As people turn away from an orientation to what is different to them. And towards an orientation to something that is the same.

Or rather someone who is the same. Now this is controversial stuff. And it doesn't sit easily with many people in Western society. But I just wanted to show that Paul isn't here just picking on gay people.

Or being arbitrary in having a go or kind of hurling stones at people who have a different view of sexuality. What he's doing here is choosing one sin because it illustrates so well the very nature of all sin.

[7:19] And then we come to the final section. And this is so helpful in light of what we just looked at. Because in verse 28 and following, Paul shows that it's not just the example of homosexuality.

But there are so many examples. That give us an idea of what flows from a human heart when we turn away from God and towards the worshiper created things. So verse 28 says, Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind.

So that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossip,

slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful.

They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents. They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death.

They not only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them. And so here in that list of things that people do and things that people think, we all find ourselves, don't we?

[8:24] Regardless of how we would describe our sexual orientation, we all find ourselves somewhere in this chapter. And the point is exactly that, that we are all in the same boat. The point of this chapter isn't to single out certain people who commit certain sins as opposed to others.

To kind of bolster the self-righteousness of some and tear down others. No, actually it's to say the same thing of everyone. That all of us are under the wrath of God.

And so all of us need what was described at the beginning. The salvation power of the gospel. That in the gospel, God offers us a righteousness from Christ.

We don't have it ourselves. This portrait is a damning portrait of the human race. But in Christ, we find righteousness. And so that's the territory we were exploring this morning.

Hopefully that brings everyone up to speed if you weren't here. But as we were looking at this, as I said, there was all kinds of questions that were going around my head. How would my friends, my neighbours, other people that I know respond to this?

[9:27] I just want to put it up on the screen. Can we get the iPad that's down here? Hopefully we can. I've got it plugged in, so we'll see what happens. Yeah, perfect. Good. I was trying to think of some of the questions that people might raise.

And before we look at some of these questions, I just want to share with you one more verse. It's a familiar verse. It comes from 1 Peter 3.15. I think it's helpful as we begin to explore these questions and think about how we would respond.

Peter says this. In the context, actually, of saying that Christians are sometimes embattled, sometimes they suffer for doing the right thing or for holding the right views. And it can be hard because people will push back against that.

And he says this. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. Do this with gentleness and respect.

And I think that's really important for us as Christians. It can be easy to come to church on a Sunday to hear something that the Bible says and to go away and not really engage that message with the people around us from week to week.

[10:27] But it's important we do that. And probably if we share with them, we'll find that they have questions for us. They have objections. They have things that they'd love us to answer because they're interested, genuinely interested.

Just a few things from this verse to pick out before we dive back into Romans. Romans, he says here, always be prepared to give an answer to people who ask you. He doesn't say, always be prepared to rattle off a pre-planned response that you've got up your sleeve for roughly the question they asked you.

Actually, what he's asking us to do is to listen to people, to hear their unique question. I mean, we're going to look at some questions that I've thought of this evening. But your friends' and your colleagues' questions won't necessarily be the same.

It's important we listen to people, hear what they're saying. Be, as James says, be slow to speak and quick to listen and slow to speak. It's really important here. And then also, it's important that we are ready to speak.

There's a sense of boldness here, isn't there, in this verse. There's a sense that we shouldn't shirk away from these opportunities. If people ask questions, take that as a God-ordained opportunity to share with them something about your faith.

[11:34] Something about the hope that you have. But at the same time, Peter knows what some Christians are like. And so he tempers it there at the end. But do this with gentleness and respect. We don't kind of lob gospel hand grenades at people and watch them explode and kind of run

away from the carnage and hide.

That's not what Peter is asking us to do here. And some people, I know, in all their zeal and their boldness, do an awful lot of damage because they forget to be careful and say things in a gentle and respectful way.

I mean, we may disagree with people. We may have a different perspective completely. But we're to be like Christ in every situation, whenever we speak to people. So, I'm hoping we can be practical this evening.

I'm hoping that we can be interactive. I'll encourage that and we'll see what happens. And what I've come up with are a few questions that people may have asked. As we went through, one of the questions that came to me was, why hasn't God made himself more clear?

There's a section in the passage which says that everyone should know that God exists. That it should be clear to everyone that there is a creator. And yet many people, I mean, I dug up, I did a little Google search and I found about 25 Richard Dawkins quotes on this topic.

[12:43] And there's others who would hold similar views to him saying that actually coming to faith is a rejection of evidence. It's a rejection of reason. It's throwing your brain out the window. Actually, if you really explore the evidence, then it says quite the opposite to what the Bible says about God.

So maybe a question your friends might have is, well, why haven't you made yourself more clear to me, God? I'd believe in you if you were clear and obvious, but you're not. Another question they may have is, how can God say that I am guilty?

And I've tried to do everything I can with punctuation to emphasize that. I'm a good person. I mean, how many people do you know who would feel like that? They live a good life. They've brought up good kids.

They've worked hard. They don't take too much leave for kind of sickness and all that kind of stuff. They're good to their bosses. They're nice people. And you'd agree, they're nice people.

But still here it says that we all fall under the wrath of God. What would you say to someone who has that objection when they read a passage like this? Or you tell them a bit about what we were looking at at church on Sunday morning. Maybe someone else would say this.

[13:45] Why is God so egocentric? Bow down or be punished isn't what I'd expect from a God of love. The whole issue of judgment and wrath is a really big issue.

And maybe one of the biggest reasons that people are put off Christianity. They're really turned off by this idea. And we find it in passages like this and elsewhere in the scriptures.

And we need to wrestle with this because it doesn't sit easily with most of the people that we will chat to week in, week out. And then finally, of course, this will come up with a passage like this. How can God be so restrictive and judgmental when it comes to other people's sexuality? I mean, that is a huge question. It will be a question here in Brighton.

It will be a question in Bournemouth where I'm from. Anywhere around the country, I think, today people would be asking this question if they were to read a passage like this. And so what I'd like us to do is to think this evening about what our response would be if your neighbor, if your friend, if your colleague were to ask you one of those questions.

[14:50] Maybe you share with them a bit about what we looked at at church. Or they ask you a question because they know that you're a Christian and they suspect you might hold some of these views. How would you respond? How would you give a reason with gentleness and with respect?

So here's what I'm hoping we can do. I'd like us to work together in smaller groups. I mean, how many are we here? We're probably 30-ish. I don't know.

I'm terrible at estimating numbers. But feel free to work with, I mean, three, four people around you. That's probably about the right sort of number. I have some pieces of paper which might help to guide our ideas.

And I rolled them up like this about two days ago. So they may never unroll. So you might have a curly piece of paper in front of you. And I know that some of you have got pens. But I suddenly realised I didn't bring any pens. Here we go. Yeah, a few of you have.

You don't have to use pens if you don't want to. But this will help to guide us. So look at this. It's like a treasure map. How exciting. So what I'd like you to do is choose one of these questions. We've got four questions up here.

[15:47] You can choose whichever one you think is most relevant for the people that you rub shoulders with. Don't feel like you need to cover all of them. There's enough here for four or five weeks of discussion. And write that in this box up here.

This is the voice of your person that you're chatting to. Your neighbour or your friend. Then here in this box, I want you just to jot down some of the thoughts that initially come to mind. This is like you hit the slow-mo button in your conversation.

They say, well hold on a second. Why hasn't God made himself more clear? And you panic. And you freeze. And you think. And all those thoughts that would go through your head immediately as someone asks you that question. You can be honest here.

It might be, I haven't got a clue. It might be, I feel like asking that question too. It might be, I don't know the answer. It might be, I want to run away. Whatever the answer, whatever it is that comes into your head.

Pop that in this box here. Then as you start to think, and you compose yourselves a bit as a group. Write down any, maybe passages of scripture. Maybe things that you'd want to share with them.

[16:42] Here's the kind of resources bit. So if you'd want to say to them, you know what? Turn to this passage of the Bible with me. You know what? Turn to this psalm. Maybe let's turn over the page and look at the next bit of Romans and see what that says.

If there's something like that would help you to answer the question, let's share that with one another in our groups and think about how we might give a reasoned response, a respectful response. So pop those ideas down here. And then finally, this little speech bubble is your voice. So after you've had a panic, had a think, thought about what we might point to in your Bible, how would you respond to that question? Okay, does that make sense? So this is their question. You pick one. This is your initial thoughts.

This is the verses you might go to. And some of us will be more familiar with the Bible than others, so there's no embarrassment here. If you just say, I haven't got a clue, that's okay. Let's share with each other and learn from one another's experience.

And then finally, what might you say? And this doesn't have to be a complete answer. I think none of these questions could be answered in the space I've given you here, even if you had very small handwriting.

[17:41] This would be the beginning of a discussion. It might be just the question that you ask them in response. You might want to continue the conversation by asking them a few questions. So all I want you to do is to begin to think, how would you respond?

If someone was to ask you one of these questions, flowing from a passage like this, how could you give a reason for the hope that you have? Does that all make sense? Yes. Good. That was a very, Mark knows what's going on.

That's good. Any questions, ask Mark. He's pretty sure of what's happening. So, actually, Mark, you can help me with this. As where people are sitting, if we can kind of, I don't know how many of these I've got, but I should have plenty. So, if you give a few out to people where they're sitting, feel free to move the chairs.

I'm sure that's all right. And, Phil, what time are we supposed to be finishing? What's the plan? We want to be... I think you heard that you thought that's a really helpful way to begin a conversation with someone.

A helpful way to perhaps give a reason for your perspective with gentleness and with kindness. Anyone here anything helpful that they want to share? It doesn't have to be something you said. It could be probably more likely to be something that someone else said to you.

[18:59] Anyone want to share something? Ruth said that God is a good God. And that a God who says how we should live does it out of his goodness.

It's a really helpful perspective to have. Yeah, that's very helpful. So, Ruth was saying that God is good. And when he tells us how we ought to live... Oh, we have a roving mic. That's good.

When he tells us how we ought to live, he does so for our good because he is good. So, that's a really helpful place to begin. Any other responses? I think there is a microphone that people are wondering whether it works or not.

But we'll continue. Any other responses to that question? I think that's a great place to start. There may be another place you wanted to start. Yeah, on the question of judgmentalism and sexuality. Sorry, restricting people's sexuality.

There's a group here saying something on the lines of... What's the purpose of sexuality? Ah, there's a microphone here. Sorry, you can repeat that maybe if you like.

[19:57] I said it all. That's it. So, the group here said something good to explore is what exactly is the purpose of sexuality?

Yeah. Yeah. Proposes. Yeah. And that may be a really useful... I mean, just generally speaking, when you talk with people, to ask a question is often quite helpful. To maybe dig a bit deeper than either you or they have to understand the conversation is really helpful, isn't it?

I think it takes the animosity out of a discussion often. And I think a really helpful discussion could come out of that. That's useful, yeah. Any other responses to this? Ways that we might begin to respond?

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Thank you. We said as a group that, you know, it's probably quite difficult, especially if you know quite a few gay people, if they ask you this question.

And maybe to make it an easier question to answer, we could really include, you know, if you look at a diversity form, it says what's your sexuality?

[20:59] Yes. And all the sexuality has come under that, including heterosexuals. So we looked at maybe we could talk about that, you know, you're not being, it's only you being pinpointed here.

That actually all sexual immorality and promiscuity, adultery is probably mentioned a lot more actually than homosexuality in the Bible.

And that God has a view on all of it. And so you need to look further than just who you're having sex with. You need to look at the whole sort of practice and look at who God is and why he'd want you to put him first.

And then we looked at trusting and obeying. Okay. And then we also looked at the battles that you go through, you know, when you're trying to get close to God or to know God.

And these things come in the way, you know, and you have to get through that battle, how graceful God would be. You know, we had some testimonies that how graceful God is when it comes to actually sort of letting go of those things and helping you to stay on that narrow path and how graceful he is in a way where he'll help you through that.

[22:10] And nothing is impossible. Yeah. And we're not saying you're going to be cured of your homosexuality. We're not saying you're not going to look at somebody and maybe there might be a flicker of something.

But God is always going to be there to help you through that. Yeah. So we looked at more of a non-practice thing than actually all of a sudden I like women thing. Yeah. There are so many helpful points there, aren't there?

I think one of the really useful things is just to broaden out the topic that we're talking about here. Actually, the Bible is actually very specific about the context for sex, but it excludes a whole lot, doesn't it?

And every person in this room, if they were to choose to follow Jesus, would find that their sexuality and their sexual behavior and their sexual thoughts would be reoriented as they come to follow Jesus.

It has an impact on everyone. And I mean, Jesus' comments on lust are fascinating, aren't they? He says that even if you just look at a woman lustfully, you've committed adultery in your heart. That even a person who doesn't commit any sexual activity needs to be subjecting their sexuality to the lordship of Jesus.

[23:16] I mean, that is profound, isn't it? And so I think to say we're not just picking on this group and that group and everyone else is fine. Actually, it's to say that anyone, whatever their circumstances, needs to really count the cost and take up their cross when they come to follow Jesus.

So that's really helpful. And then also to be realistic. I think that's so important. And I mean, I have a really good friend who is a Christian and he experiences attraction to men exclusively. He's never found women attractive. He's 33, I think. And so he's got a bit of his life behind him, a bit of his life ahead of him. But he doesn't see anywhere on the horizon that he's going to be cured or changed.

He just expects that life will go on like this. And there are joys in life. There are struggles to that. And that is part of his discipleship as he follows Jesus. And there's ways as a church we can make that more possible and more manageable for people.

We can support others. But it's not necessarily easy. But I think, yeah, to be realistic is helpful, especially if someone's really beginning to explore what it might mean for them if they were to follow Jesus. Yeah, that's very helpful.

[24:24] Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. No. And to share some of those stories, maybe, I mean, you might not share names or anything, but it might be a shock to people that actually there are Christians who are following Jesus and experience attraction to people of the same sex.

That might be an absolute bombshell to some people. They might not think those kinds of people exist, but there are plenty of them, aren't there? So that's very helpful. And they're trying to be faithful to Christ in the situation they find themselves.

Anything else? Maybe one more conversation starter or point you'd want to get across. If you had a few. Yes, Brenda. The microphone's going on.

Just one quick comment. Yes. Although we were doing different questions, in both groups we had a comment that in one sense the way to think about each of those questions is to go back and think of God as creator.

We didn't really have time to develop that, but if you really view God as creator and what that means, it sort of helps you to answer any of those four questions as you develop it.

[25:35] Although we didn't get that far. Yeah, that's really helpful. And it's no surprise, actually. You look at Romans 1 and it flows from the place of affirming God as the creator. And so it's no surprise that that's what you need to get back to, to answer some of those questions.

Really helpful. I think we've got just a little bit of time to do, what was the next most popular one? I think it was, why doesn't God make himself clear, wasn't it? That was the next most popular question. So we'll go for that one next in by popular demand.

Who heard anything helpful in answering that question? Did anyone hear any good responses or any helpful stuff? Yeah. Oh, sorry, microphone. It's just behind you.

There you go. What we were discussing in our two groups was that really the evidence that something's going on that's far beyond our understanding is all around us.

Yes. In nature, in life. So the evidence really is perfectly clear that there is something going on.

Yeah. And it's far beyond our understanding and God is what we call it.

[26:36] Yeah. Yeah. And a lot of people are open to that. I think some people would push against that, but some people are open to begin to explore that. Any other responses as we pick up on that question? I think when we were discussing that question in our group, we also thought that his word made a lot clearer about God.

Yes. There are people who aren't looking at it properly, but it does, apart from creation, which was mentioned this morning. Yeah. But actually, Ben put a helpful comment that, of course, in Jesus' day, when people saw miracles, they still didn't believe.

So even when God was, you could say, at his clearest doing something otherworldly, people still didn't believe and had a blindness. And it's interesting, isn't it?

I mean, maybe you've had the experience talking to someone who's a fairly hardened atheist, and they're quite convinced of their view. If you had to sort of push a bit and say, well, what exactly would it take for you to change your mind?

What, if you saw it, would convince you to believe? And usually, it seems that there are almost no circumstances. Even if a supposed miracle happened in front of them, they would find another reason or another explanation for that.

[27:47] And I think, as you kind of push back and forth with that in conversation, sometimes it becomes clear to you or to the person you're

talking to that there's something deeper going on there, actually. It's not just about whether the evidence is compelling or not.

Because I think, as you said, it is. The other thing, I mean, you were talking about Scripture, weren't you? And the passage here, which we're looking at in Romans, says that it's only, really, that there's some being with divinity and some being with great power that we can see from creation.

We can't tell everything about God. And so much more is pointed out in Scripture. One of the things, I mean, maybe you'd want to do would be just to push back and say, well, have you read any of the Bible? I mean, as a grown-up, not in school assemblies, but if you ever picked up a Bible and challenge them on their sort of intellectual integrity, if you're honestly going to say that there's no evidence, have a look at the evidence.

Take maybe a copy of Mark's Gospel, it's nice and short, and read it for a couple of hours and see what you make of it. Then we'll have a proper conversation. So maybe cut the conversation off, say, I'm not going to talk to you until you've actually looked at the evidence. It may be helpful to challenge someone on that because there's evidence which people aren't necessarily engaging with.

And obviously the person of Jesus is the most clear evidence for the existence of God. So that's a good thing to explore with people. Good. We probably haven't got time, have we, Philip, to do any more.

[29:06] We need to stop. That's absolutely fine. Thank you for your involvement. Thank you so much for discussing these things. I don't imagine you've got the material to put together a book answering this question or whatever. There's not been enough time.

But I hope it's got you thinking, partly thinking how you would start to answer these questions. Hearing from each other's experience. Because some of us are just amazing. There's people in this room who are probably great at responding winsomely and gently to people's questions.

And it's good to learn from each other. It's good to know, isn't it, as Christians, that we have a trustworthy gospel. That we have a true gospel. And we shouldn't be afraid of people's questions, their accusations.

We can be confident. As we read several times today, the gospel is good news and the power of God for everyone who believes. This is good news for everybody, regardless of their sexual orientation, regardless of their view of all these different questions.

This is good news. And I think when we come from that place, we can respond well by God's power to these questions. I'm going to pray for us. And then I think that will be the end of this session.

[30:14] And we'll have some time before communion. Is that right? Perfect. Father, thank you for the time we've had this evening. To just begin to explore together how we could respond.

If a friend or a colleague had a question like this. Please, Father, help us to be people who are gentle, who are kind. But also help us to be bold.

Lord, it's so easy to duck these questions. We hear a conversation happening on the other side of the office. And we keep away from that area just in case someone picks on us and asks us what we think about this.

Lord, I pray that we would be people who are not ashamed of the gospel. Not ashamed of what you teach in the Bible. Lord, please, Father, make us people who aren't ashamed of Jesus. Lord, we want to be bold followers of Christ.

Who are ready to speak whenever you call us to. Whenever the opportunity presents itself. Help us to know how to answer. And Father, as we try to do so in a way that is relevant in our culture.

[31:19] As we try to do so in a way that doesn't unnecessarily offend people. But communicates powerfully what your son Jesus is like. And what a difference he could make in their life.

Please help us to do that by the power of your spirit. Lord, send us out as it were as missionaries into this city. And all around the place, wherever we live. To be able to speak for Jesus in this way. So we ask for your power and your enabling. In his name. Amen. Amen. Thank you. Thank you.