

The God of the Gospel

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Date: 06 February 2022

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[0 : 00] We're going to be reading now from the book of Romans, chapter 1, starting at verse 18 through the end of the chapter.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they know God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[1 : 26] Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever.

Amen. Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature.

And the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

[2 : 41] Though they know God's righteous decrees that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them. Well, good morning, everyone.

Those on Zoom as well. Well, I'd like to start with a question, and today is no different. So here it goes. Confronting question, what matters most to you when you think about God?

What matters most to you when you think about God? I'm going to give you two options. Is it how well you feel your life is going? God's in charge of life, as it were.

So is it how well you feel your life is going, or is it how you stand before God, or how God's view of you? Just take a couple of seconds, literally take a few seconds, just to decide which one matters most to you when you think about God.

I think if we're honest, most of us default to self-interested thinking in most things.

[4 : 09] Even when thinking about God and God's powerful gospel. Will it fix my brokenness, my bad habits, my struggling relationships?

Will it deliver me a hassle-free life? Does it promise me an enjoyable experience? That's a fairly modern one. Happiness. When we come to read Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome, it's anything but self-interested.

His focus constantly, especially in the introduction, in the first 17 verses, is very strongly God-centered. God's powerful gospel.

And this morning, the God of the gospel. Paul knows that what matters most is not whether we feel good, whether we have our needs met, whether we've had a meaningful experience when we come

to church.

What matters most is how God thinks of us, whether we're in a good relationship with God, and on what basis we believe we're in that relationship with God. And in verse 16 and 17, which was the sort of climax of Paul's introduction, he says, For I am not ashamed of the gospel.

[5 : 31] Why is he not ashamed of the gospel? Because it's the power of God for salvation. God's gospel, the God of the gospel, the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed. In it, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.

The gospel, God's powerful gospel, does two things. It shows us both what God is like, his righteousness, and it shows us God's way of salvation, God's way of people coming back into right relationship with him.

But if that's the introduction, then it raises a very, very big question. And that's what Paul turns his attention to in this next section of his letter that runs all the way from chapter 1, verse 18, through to chapter 3, verse 20.

The question is this. Who needs the gospel? And why do we need the gospel to come back into right relationship with God?

[6 : 51] It's almost as if, I remember when I first came down here, there's an advertising billboard out in Hexham Way, and it actually had great big letters. If Jesus is the answer, then what is the question?

Paul tells us in his introduction that Jesus is the answer. Now we're starting to jump into the question. What is the question? The question is, who needs this gospel, this powerful gospel, and why do we need it?

Why do we need it to be put back into the right relationship with God? Because I guess most people in their natural state, if you ask them what God thinks of them, they'll say, well, I'm not perfect, but I've done this and this and this and this.

And so I think overall they'll think, I'm acceptable to God. So this question of who needs the gospel and why, we'll unpack over the next three Sundays.

But before I jump into the details of 1, 18 verse 32, 18 through to 32, I want you to step back and frame the argument at a sort of big picture level.

[8 : 02] So I want you to talk first about salvation and wrath as two sides of the one coin of God's righteousness. Now, if you look at verse 17, it says, the righteous for in it, that is God's powerful gospel, in it the righteousness of God is revealed.

Paul's introduction finishes verse 17 with a spotlight on God's righteousness. And righteousness means, as I said last week, faithfulness to his promise to love and deliver his special covenant people.

And that's been revealed in an ongoing way. The righteousness of God is being revealed. How is it being revealed? It's been revealed through the gospel. God's salvation powerfully delivered through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But then Paul's next sentence, the beginning of verse 8, launches into this idea of the wrath of God. How did we get from this glorious notion of the righteousness of God in the gospel to the wrath of God in the next sentence?

The connection's really, really important, I think, to our understanding of what Paul's going to do over the next few chapters. The next sentence goes really dark, shifting to the wrath of God, which he says in verse 18, is also being revealed in an ongoing way, present tense, present continuous.

[9 : 27] So the question is, why the sudden shift from hugely positive to darkly negative? Answer, because Paul's starting to address this question and spell out the answer to this question, who needs the gospel and why we need it?

Who needs God's righteousness as a gift through the gospel, that which is spoken about in verses 16 and 17? And why we need God's righteousness as a gift through the gospel?

Why? Well, because of God's wrath. Now, God's wrath is his sort of considered response.

It's not that just God flies off the handle in a temper tantrum. Wrath is a considered response or judgment on unrighteousness.

That's what it says. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of mankind, humankind. So the wrath of God is God's considered response.

[10 : 38] What's unrighteousness then? Well, if the righteousness of God is a reflection of God's character and God's character responding to unrighteousness, then by definition, unrighteousness is anything that's contrary to God's character.

Anything that's at odds with God's status as creator and Lord of this universe. Which is, of course, otherwise described in the Bible as sin or rebellion.

So, the wrath of God, a considered response against anything that's contrary to his character or his standing as creator and Lord of this universe, where he sees it in mankind, humankind, sinners, sinners rather.

Now, what we have to understand here is that for Paul, it's not a change of focus at all because God's wrath is equally an expression of God's righteousness.

It's one coin with two sides. And we see that throughout the history of Israel if you read through the Old Testament. God's righteousness was seen either in magnificent deliverances of God's people and salvation or at other points in the history of Israel, God's righteousness was seen as calling his people to account and bringing judgment upon them.

[12 : 15] Either partial judgment or more complete judgment or total judgment. Both were acts of God's righteousness in respect of his people.

And so, Paul's intention here, I think, and it's been a bit of a long-winded argument, hopefully I haven't lost you on it, but I think it's an important argument. Paul's intention here, I think, as we move from verse 16, 17 into verse 18 and the rest of the letter, Paul's intention here is to highlight the wonder, the splendor of God gifting us his righteousness in the gospel, that which makes us acceptable to God.

He wants to highlight that against the dark and hopeless condition of mankind in their natural state, that is, in their unrighteousness.

So Paul's making a contrast here to answer the question why we need it. Why do we need it? Well, this is an expression of God's righteousness in the gospel. Why do we need it? Because we're unrighteous.

We do that which is contrary to God's status, which challenges God's status, which is at odds with God's character. which leaves us unacceptable to God and facing condemnation.

[13 : 39] So, who needs the gospel then? Who needs this gospel of God's, of the gift of God's righteousness in Jesus? Answer here again, all mankind.

The word men there is actually humankind. which means, if you go back to verse 14 where Paul mentioned Greeks and barbarians, it means that the barbarian, and that was a term by the Romans and the Greeks for everybody else in the world, apart from the Jews.

So, the barbarians, and these barbarians had very, very little knowledge of the one true God. All they had was what they could observe in the physical creation.

Do they need the gospel? Absolutely, says Paul. The Greeks and the Romans, sophisticated civilizations who have a finely tuned conscience, do they need the gospel? Absolutely, says Paul, because they're unrighteous.

What about the Jews? They've actually got God's written word. God spoke to them directly. Do they need the gospel? Well, we'll see in chapter 3. Absolutely, says Paul. They also are unrighteous. All are without excuse.

[14 : 48] Now, why are all without excuse? big point, which is the point you need to take away from all of what I've been saying up to this point, because nobody, none live according to what they know about God.

None live according to what they know about God. Now, the problem of unrighteousness is not a problem of a lack of knowledge of God.

It's a problem of the choice to live contrary to what they do know about God. That's the problem of unrighteousness.

It's a deliberate choice. Let me put it another way, perhaps a little bit more confronting. Why will God condemn, sorry, let me try that word again.

Why will God condemn people who might have lived in the deepest, darkest part of the Amazon, who have never heard of Jesus or God or the Bible in any sort of written way?

[15 : 51] Why will God condemn them? Answer, not because of what they don't know about the Bible or Jesus, but because they refuse to live in the light of what they do know about God from observing the physical universe around them.

So, let's jump into 18 to 32 now and see if we can demonstrate that principle under two headings. The first one is this, both autonomy headings.

The first one is that autonomy is pursued as people seek freedom at any cost. Now, we all know the idea of autonomy.

It's been sort of fascinating and scary at the same time to look at autonomy just in the motor vehicle industry alone. Autonomous vehicles, for goodness sake. They drive themselves, apparently.

In other words, the driver's been displaced. That's autonomy for you. But we all know it personally too, don't we?

[17:00] We all know it as a constant desire for freedom. And boy, has that been a big word through the pandemic, an increasingly big word through the pandemic. We all want to do what we want to do when we want to do it, as we want to do it.

Freedom. Freedom. Freedom at any cost, I would dare to add. Now, Paul argues in these verses here that the desire for autonomy is a key driver in the way people respond to God.

And the reason why all people, without exception, naturally attract and deserve God's wrath or judgment. you look at verses 19 and 20.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

so they are without excuse. Any person observing our physical world is but confronted by the reality of God.

[18:36] We cannot actually see him, but his fingerprints are everywhere. And it's a very simple argument, really, that we can understand.

If you look at a computer, my laptop, for instance, if you look at the complexity of my laptop, it's obvious that it required somebody bigger than the laptop to actually design and construct it.

So, when you look at our physical world in all its beauty and complexity, it points to a very real and powerful designer. mirror. But verse 18, the problem is that people want to suppress that which is obvious, the truth about God.

Why do they want to suppress the truth about God? because to admit that truth, to embrace that truth, is also to embrace that that God may well have some designs on relationship with you.

If he's bigger than you, you are then under him. There's, by definition, a relationship that's implied there. People suppress the truth because they want to avoid the relationship.

[20:00] Freedom. We want to do our own thing, answer to ourselves. So, verses 21, 22, and 23, instead of honoring God, what do they do?

They treat him shamefully. And there's that theme again, shame and honor, that we saw last week. They treat him shamefully. How do they treat him shamefully? Well, listen to the verses. When I can find them.

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. But they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Instead of acknowledging their existence to God and dependence on him, they treat him shamefully.

How do they treat him shamefully? Well, they're constantly reducing God. They're constantly trying to bring God down to a size which is comfortable to exist with, and perhaps even control.

[21:08] So if God's way up there big, whoa, that's scary. Let's bring him down and make him into a stone or a totem pole, and we'll say, okay, we'll carve him, we'll fashion him, we'll stick him here, and then that's ours to control.

That's God. blurring distinction between God and that which he has made. So God is now part of a piece of wood or part of a piece of stone or part of a building.

And we're told here the ultimate consequence of continually suppressing truth is that ultimately reality becomes so distorted that we can no longer access truth.

In other words, we've lived under a lie so long that now the lie has become the truth for us. We can't actually get back to what it was before the lie. And the lie is that people can decide, individuals can decide what God is like, or they can even decide to replace him completely if they don't like the idea of God.

And what do they replace him with? Well, we're told they're autonomy, self-wisdom, and self-worship. Now, friends, this is the culture we live in.

[22 : 36] And therefore, we must say it's a culture under God's wrath, and a culture without excuse. For all our knowledge and discovery and science and research, and it's vast.

There are a lot of really clever people out there doing a lot of really amazing research. But all of it is predicated by desire to suppress the truth.

That's a general statement, I should say. I'm talking about in cultural terms. as a nation, and individually, we've rejected God, most clearly seen in Jesus and the gospel.

But here's the rub, you see, having rejected God and the gospel, our culture is not any less spiritual. It is just as spiritual as ever.

what's happened now is, and you only have to listen to your TV for a day to see this demonstrated, what's happened now is that any form of spirituality is now welcomed and accepted.

[23 : 51] And every form of spirituality appears on the TV except Jesus suppressing the truth.

There's a long list which are becoming increasingly popular, increasingly mainstream. Each appears to seek God, and this is something we've been pushed into as Christians and we've wrongly given up ground here.

We've been pushed to say that First Nations culture and First Nations spirituality has its own integrity. Wrong, says the Bible. First Nations spirituality and every other form of spirituality we see in our nation, whether it's consumerism or celebrity worship in sport and Hollywood, every one of those spiritualities is designed to suppress the truth about God.

It's a strategy to suppress truth, hide from God, reduce God, or in some cases even replace God. Autonomy at any cost. But that's not the end of the problem.

The deliberate choice has real and dramatic consequences, which is the second part of our text this morning from verse 24 onwards. Autonomy is actually experienced, but it becomes a grotesque form of freedom with debasing destructive costs.

[25 : 29] God's wrath is being revealed, present continuous. Well, the question is, how do we see God's wrath being revealed in a present continuous context, sense?

How do we experience it? Well, in these verses 24 through to 31, the awfulness of God's wrath in its current expression among us as a culture is emphasized by threefold repetition.

Verse 24, where am I? Verse 24, here we go. Therefore, there's your connection back to what was been said, therefore, God gave them up, that's the repetition phrase, God gave them up in the lusts of their heart to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

Amen. God gives people up to lust and impurity. The human craving to be loved, to be valued, to be validated, to be secure, that's a natural human craving.

Well, Paul's point here is that when that's not sought in relationship with God, it will be pursued in all kinds of false intimacy.

[27 : 11] And there's a whole range of false intimacies, which I'm not going to detail this morning, but there's just a plethora of them. But that's the thing. When we're not seeking these identifying, defining relationships in the Lord, then we will find them and seek them elsewhere.

And this false intimacy, when it's pursued, apart from God, actually becomes consumerist. We consume one another. When we use our bodies, and do use our bodies, in destructive ways, we use our bodies in destructive ways, trying to get positive validation.

It's a crazy thing. And we can see, therefore, the futility of thinking that's been spoken about in the earlier verses. We keep on thinking these destructive behaviors will deliver the good things we need in our heart of hearts.

Verse 26. For this reason, again, the link, for this reason, God gave them up. There's the repetition. God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another.

[28 : 42] Men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. God gives people up to dishonorable passions.

My friends, again, the personal craving for personal identity, that's what's common right across gender dysphoria and homosexuality, is a craving for identity, a craving for transformation,

salvation, something that will lift them out of the sadness and the limitations of their current life, something that will deliver happiness and hope into a world that seems despairing to them. When these things, that sort of identity, is not sought in transformational relationship with the Lord, then it will be sought and found in all sorts of abnormal relationships. relationships. And the strange thing about it is, when it's sought apart from God, then the things that we would normally consider, then the things that would normally be considered boundaries in these relationships are so easily removed and replaced. because the drive is for this freedom, for happiness, for a transformation. And we'll try anything rather than go down the path of transformational relationship with the Lord. [30 : 22] And when such relationships are formed with people who already reject any notion of being made in the image of God, made to reflect God's character and relationship, then as I say, natural boundaries, natural restraints, which once seemed so obvious and so fixed, now become so easily removed and redefined.

Self-wisdom. Self-worship. Verse 28. The third.

The trifacta. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

And then you get that list. And it really is a shotgun list of relationships, isn't it? I spent some time pondering this week and I couldn't think of anything in any of my relationships over my 65 years that's not in that list.

It's a comprehensive list. But mind you, it sits alongside the two previous God gave them up. So it's not as if, as this is what some Christians have done, have made this text all about homosexuality.

[31 : 48] But it's not all about homosexuality, it includes homosexuality, but it involves the destructive things we bring to relationships generally at every point in every relationship.

Gay, bi, straight, whatever you want to call them. The problem's the same. God gave people up to a debased mind and destructive behaviors.

And here's where we're so clever as people and so stupid. Made in the image of God, sorry, I should only call myself stupid, I shouldn't call you stupid, but anyway, that's a generic sort of thing. Made in the image of God, we've got this wonderful human ability to think, to set goals, and then to strategize to achieve those goals.

And this incredible creativity, when not shaped and informed by God's mind and character, then becomes self-interested, exploitative, and ruthless.

And that's exactly what Paul describes in verses 29 to 31. It could be a summary of any given news report on any given day in Australia.

[33 : 14] Even more sadly, it could be a summary of many family interactions on any given day in Australia. It's as if God is saying to people through these, God gave them over.

It's as if God's saying to people, you don't want him to know me, you don't want him to honour me, you don't want him to live under my rule, well, I'll leave you to it. Here it is, see how you like it, see how well you do with it.

I'll give you over to the autonomy you want. I promise I won't interfere with you. I'll step back and let you have your head. I'll let you loose to experience the autonomy you've been craving.

I'll not prevent you from spiralling downwards into thinking and actions which will debase yourself and destroy yourself and everybody around you.

Have a good sacrifice and see how you like it, says the Lord. God. And again, my friends, this is our culture. People are obsessed with freedom.

[34 : 29] They're demanding a lack of restraints, a removal of restraints in almost every sphere of life. Don't ask me to wear a mask because it might be helpful for people around me.

I don't want to wear a mask and I won't wear a mask. But here's the rub you see.

When people think they're enjoying their greatest freedom, they're actually experiencing God's judgment.

In part now, but chapter 2 verse 5 says there's much worse to come. That partial judgment now will become a final judgment one day. And the consequences are everywhere to be seen around us in this grotesque distortion of truth about people and human relationships at every level.

victimhood. And again, in keeping with what Paul says here, victims of their own passion for autonomy, the thing they once chose to pursue now controls them.

[35 : 53] So they're unable to break away from it. Even as they experience and recognize the damage it causes.

So how do we address this massive, terrible blight on society of domestic violence? Well, we need more money put into the coffers. We need more counselors unable to break free from it.

Which leads Paul to conclude, ever so sadly, in verse 32, people know experientially that their thinking and actions have not delivered the good life.

They know the pain of competition in relationships. They know the effects of jealousy and exploitation of being used, being consumed in relationships. They sense they're made for something better than the relationships they now experience.

They long for something superior, someone superior to transform them, to make their relationships the things they want them to be. But in spite of that painful experience, their commitment to autonomy makes them continue in their destructive freedom.

[37 : 19] And how do they reassure themselves? foolishness that this pathway is the right pathway? Well, they encourage others around them to do the same things. Is that foolishness or what?

It's like lemons, lemons, lemmings, those little things that used to go over the cliff anyway, one after the other. Okay. friends, with the graphic backdrop of the reality of God's righteousness expressed in his wrath and condemnation of all sin, and that's every sinner, we come full circle and the need to identify and engage with the challenge of what matters most when you think of God.

the immediate reality of living daily with the reality of God's wrath, my friends, has to be sobering, does it not?

But again, here's another twist in this story, because at the same time, partial judgment is a great blessing from the Lord. In that, it warns us of even greater judgment to come and pushes us to take up the offer of the gospel presented in verse 16 and 17, that we can actually find a righteousness, we can be given a righteousness as a gift in the Lord Jesus, in the gospel.

And that's the means by which both we can escape his wrath and judgment and become acceptable to him and secure and have an identity and have fulfillment and meaning and purpose and ultimately have happiness and joy in life.

[39 : 06] life. So I just finished on this and I've run over time, I'm sorry, but I'm going to finish on it anyway, so how sorry is that one? I'm going to keep going.

Either you're not a believer here this morning. If that's you, if you're not a believer here this morning, then it means you're still committed to autonomy, your own autonomy.

autonomy. Perhaps you're committed to living the lie that you can live successfully as though God doesn't even exist. You'll just be the master of your own ship. Convinced that your authority is the only authority that matters, that you just need to answer to yourself and be happy in your own skin. And that by your own efforts you can achieve the good life now and then be able to do a deal with God when you die and stand before him that your righteousness is sufficient to get you over the line. Well I'd ask you to re-read these verses this morning my friend.

Because that ain't true. You're in big danger. You can ignore what's obvious from experience, the things that are not right about yourself, not right in your world.

[40 : 25] You can work harder to be even nicer. You can spend your life trying to make the world a better place. You can make up the rules as you go.

You can run your own life. But you're still in danger. Or you're a believer. You're a believer and if you're a believer then I hope and pray that you've given up your desire for autonomy.

And any thought of being able to build your own righteousness because you know that from the inside out your thinking, your attitude, your desires, your actions, they're all so distorted in your natural state because of sin that you need a complete renewal.

And that complete renewal comes in the gospel. So you come to Jesus to receive God's righteousness as a free gift and therefore you gladly live now under God's rule.

no longer craving autonomy but craving dependence and closer relationship with God. Welcoming the way his character shapes you and gives you security and gives you joy and hope.

[41 : 34] All the things you crave naturally as a human being. And you share also Paul's excitement about God's powerful gospel which delivers from sin and renews our ability to live properly as God's image bears.

My final sentence. Make no mistake. It is impossible to avoid God's righteousness in action in his world.

So here are the two options again. Will you seize the opportunity to come to Jesus in the gospel and know God's righteousness in your life as deliverance and salvation and renewal?

Or will you push the barrel of autonomy and crash into God's wrath and condemnation? Normally I would pray at the end of this talk but I'm just going to let you use this time as I sit down and Adam comes up again just to be in your own space with the Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you very much.