

Rom 1 18-32
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Have you ever had one of those days,
where everything was going along comfortably:
the sun was shining, the flowers were out,
the people you love were all happily going about their lives,
and then suddenly something happens,
a piece of bad news from left field,
and it all turns from good to bad just like that?

As you read Romans chapter 1,
it feels a bit as if Paul had one of those days about verse 18.
Last week we were reading of his love for the Roman Christians,
his eagerness to visit them,
his passion for the gospel.
I am not ashamed of the gospel,
because it is the power of God
that brings salvation to everyone who believes:
first to the Jew,
then to the Gentile.
For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed,
a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,
just as it is written:
the righteous by faith will live.
Paul seems happy and enthusiastic.
And then suddenly,
seemingly out of the blue,
“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven
against all the godlessness and wickedness of people
who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”
What happened to make Paul’s mood suddenly go black?

The answer is,
nothing happened.

For Paul, there's an unbreakable connection between the gospel and the wrath of God.

In fact, in the original Greek, there is the word "For" at the start of verse 18.

The righteous by faith will live.

For the wrath of God is being revealed.

What's the connection?

The gospel is about being saved.

I am not ashamed of the gospel,

because it is the power of God

for the salvation of everyone who believes.

If the gospel is about being saved,

there needs to be something to be saved from.

A life saver saves you from drowning.

A fireman saves you from burning.

Jesus saves you from the wrath of God.

The gospel is good news

because it tells you that you have been saved from the wrath of God.

Paul has got his introductions over,

and this is the first major teaching section of his letter.

From 1:18 to 3:20, he methodically explains

how every person in the world faces the wrath of God.

Which sounds terribly depressing until you understand

that he is explaining why every person in the world needs the gospel,

and why every person in the world can be saved

if they become a follower of Jesus.

So in chapter 1 he explains why pagan people

who have never heard of God's law face the wrath of God.

In 2:1-16, he explains why those who morally try to live by human laws

face the wrath of God.

In 2:17-29, he explains why Jewish people face the wrath of God.

And in chapter 3 he says,

that sums it up,

we are all alike.

We all face the wrath of God.
 We all need to respond to the gospel to be saved.

So the section we are looking at today explains why pagan people who have never heard of God's law face the wrath of God.

You could sum up the message of this section in the phrase, "ignorance is no excuse."

We know that's the case.

If the policeman pulls you over and says,

"I'm booking you for speeding."

and you say,

"But I didn't see the speed limit sign."

You are still going to have to pay that fine.

So why is ignorance no excuse

for those who have never heard of God's law?

1:18-19 Paul says that they 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.

Now that's a pretty big call.

They've never held a Bible,

let alone read one.

They've never set foot inside a church.

They've never had an RE lesson at school.

How can stuff about God be plain to them?

Paul says,

1:20 "For since the creation of the world

God's invisible qualities,

his eternal power and divine nature –

have been clearly seen,

being understood from what has been made,

so that people are without excuse."

In other words,

look around you!

You might not be able to know everything about God from creation.

But you can certainly know this much.
There is a powerful being out there who is divine.
And he should be glorified and thanked.
You can't look around you.
You can't see the miracle of a baby growing in its mother's tummy.
You can't look down a microscope
and see the intricate complexity of a living cell.
You can't look up into the night sky in all its beautiful complexity –
and not conclude that there is a powerful creator
who should be thanked and glorified.
You might not be able to work out
that Jesus died on the cross for you by looking at creation.
But you can work out that there is a creator who should be thanked.
Now of course there are many who do look at creation,
and still don't believe in a creator.
Yes that's true.
Paul says
at some unconscious level
they are suppressing the truth by their wickedness.

What happens to those who suppress this truth by their wickedness?
Paul says that the wrath of God is being revealed against them.
Now we are tuned to thinking about the wrath of God
as something which is revealed on the last day.
Something revealed on judgement day
for those who don't worship Jesus.
But Paul is talking about right now.
He says,
“The wrath of God is being revealed.”
How does God reveal his wrath right now?
Paul says,
“For although they knew God,
they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. ...
Therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts.”
That's right.

God's wrath is revealed by giving people exactly what they want!

What's the worst thing you could do for a pokies addict?
If you gave them an unlimited supply of gold coins
and put them in a room full of poker machines
that would be pretty close to the worst thing you could do.
They would waste their life staring at the flashing lights.

You and I might not be pokies addicts.
But we, like every human being,
have an uncomfortable addiction to sin.
And when we give up on thanking and glorifying our maker,
his punishment for us,
is to give us over to whatever we abandon him for.
And those things whatever they are become the punishment.
If you worship having a good time,
instead of worshipping God,
You become a slave of having a good time.
And in the end you might look like the people
who come pouring out of night clubs at 4am.
An empty hollow in their hearts –
always chasing a good time –
but never finding it.
Taking party drugs
because the good time of the night club
is not a good enough time anymore.
And descending further and further into a lifestyle of debauchery,
which is in itself a terrible punishment.
God's punishment is to give us over to whatever we abandon him for.
And that puts us in a downward spiral.
The more we abandon God.
The more the things we turn to –
the things God gives us over to –
harm us.

For the pagans of Paul's day,
when they failed to thank and glorify the creator God,
they chose instead to worship idols.

Images made to look like people, animals, birds or reptiles.
So God gave them over to their idolatry.

But it didn't stop there.

With every shrine to an idol in the ancient world,
there was a prostitute.

That is what they desired instead of their creator.

So God gave them over to the desires of their hearts.

In verse 24,

“Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts
to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.”

It was just a downward spiral.

In verse 26,

“God gave them over to shameful lusts.

Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.

In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women
and were inflamed with lust for one another.

Men committed shameful acts with other men,

and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

If you give up on worship of the one true God –

his punishment is to give you what you want.

And what you want will take you on a downward spiral

till you are a slave to your own perversion.

The endpoint is the litany of wrongs we read between verses 29-32.

“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 gossips, 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.” It’s not a description you would want on your CV. It’s not a description you would want etched on your tomb stone. But it’s not a description that anyone sets out to attain. It’s just the natural endpoint, of God giving a person over to the sin that they choose.

Now I want to briefly make some comments about homosexuality.

This passage is not one where Paul is setting out to give a Christian stance about the practice of homosexuality. He just mentions it in passing, as an example of the perversion that fills the human heart when we abandon the worship of the one true God. But nonetheless, this passage is an important one for considering a Christian view of homosexuality in the current state of debate within the church and the world. Up until recently, homosexuality was always considered a perversion of God’s created order. God people in the Old Testament and the Christian church have always held that view for over 3000 years. But because we live in a society that doesn’t glorify God nor gives thanks to him, his wrath is being revealed by giving us over to the sinful desires of our own hearts. And so many in our society have begun to adopt an approving stance towards homosexuality. This is despite the clear evidence of what a damaging practice it is. For male homosexuals, here are the statistics.

- a 25-30 year decrease in life expectancy
- Chronic, potentially fatal, liver disease - infectious hepatitis, which increase the risk of liver cancer

- Inevitably fatal immune disease including associated cancers
- Frequently fatal rectal cancer
- multiple bowel and other infectious diseases
- A much higher than usual incidence of suicide
- A very low likelihood that its adverse effects can be eliminated unless the condition itself is
- An at least 50% likelihood of being eliminated through lengthy, often costly, and very time consuming treatment in an otherwise unselected group of sufferers.

Now within the church

there is always a pressure to become like the world.

When the consensus view in the community changes, many in the church don't want to be "left behind".

And so we have a position in the Anglican church at present which is tearing the church apart world wide.

We have separate Anglican Churches in US, Canada, Brazil, Scotland, New Zealand, England and Australia.

In each jurisdiction people

who have wanted to stay faithful have been forced to leave.

And many Anglicans from more Bible believing sections of the church are absolutely appalled that God's word could be set aside.

Especially when it speaks so clearly as it does here in Romans 1.

Now amongst those who have taken this novel position,

there have been a variety of ways

of trying to talk their way around this text.

Some just dismiss the apostle Paul out of hand.

I can't understand

why you would bother to still call yourself a Christian –

if you want to jettison such a large part of historic Christianity.

Others point to the word natural in verses 26 and 27.

They say,

"Paul was only talking about heterosexual people engaging in homosexual acts.

That would be unnatural for them.
But for people born homosexual –
then a homosexual relationship is completely natural.”
But I think it’s pretty clear in Romans 1,
that when Paul says something is natural –
he doesn’t mean that it feels natural to the person –
he means that it is according the way God created the world.
And homosexual relationships
are a violation of the way God created the world.
They are part of his wrath that is being revealed.
They are part of the sinful desires of hearts
that God gives people over to
when they give up on giving thanks to him and glorifying him.

So what do we do?

We must stand firm and continue to believe
what God clearly says in his word.
God will only bless a church that is obedient to him.
And we are going to need to be willing
to accept the consequences of believing what we believe.
Andrew Thorburn is not going to be the last person to lose his job
because he goes to a church the government believes is bigoted.
And that makes is super important that we have a counter narrative.
People have to see us lovingly caring for all people.
There must be nothing about our behaviour
that they can label as homophobia.
When they look at us, they must be able to see
that the bigoted intolerant label doesn't fit.
If we are angry and condemning,
it will reinforce their worst fears.
We will still be called homophobic,
but a fair minded person must be able to look at us and see it's not true.

In Paul’s description,
the downwards spiral doesn’t finish with the practice of homosexuality.

It finishes with the catalogue of ills in 29-32.

The end of the downward spiral is not the evil God gives us over to, it's approving of it.

1:32 “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.”

We need to earnestly pray for our national and international church. When we get to the point of approving of evil, then we have been given over by God to his wrath.

But what is the positive response to this revelation of the wrath of God that we have read about today?

We need to glorify God as God and give thanks to him.

Then he won't give us over to the sinful desires of our hearts – rather the desire of our hearts will be the glory of God.

That won't result in the removal of the parts of God's creation we are tempted to worship instead of him.

I think deep down we fear that sometimes.

If I worship God,

I won't have time for golf or lawn bowls

or I will be too holy to enjoy sex

or I will wind up giving away all my possessions to the poor and live a thoroughly miserable existence.

But worshipping God won't remove us from the good things he has created.

It will only remove us from the temptation to worship the good things God has created, and so be enslaved by them.

We will still be able to enjoy God's good gifts, but we will enjoy them in their proper context.

Sex will be enjoyed in the context of building love in a marriage.

Relaxation will be enjoyed as a path to refreshing the mind and body to better serve our Lord.

Money will be enjoyed
as it is spent on things that promote love and friendship.
Worshipping God doesn't mean denying his creation.
Only rejoicing in the creation as a good gift of the creator,
who is to be praised and thanked and glorified.
Worshipping God is the path to life in all its fullness.
Jesus said that.
He said,
"I have come that they may have life –
and have it in all its fullness."
It's a lie of the evil one,
that God is holding good things back from us.
He's not.
God has blessed us with every blessing in Jesus Christ.
Praise him for his goodness.