

Rom 2:1-3:8  
*Tim Anderson 30/10/22*

Let me remind you where we are in Paul's letter to the Romans.

His aim is to explain the gospel.

The message that brings salvation.

The good news.

But in order for salvation to be good news,

we need to know what we are saved from.

The answer is the wrath of God.

And so we have this section of the letter from 1:18 to 3:20

where Paul explains

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

We need to understand how bad our situation is,

so we can understand how good the gospel is.

If you're a passenger on the Titanic,

and someone says to you,

"I've saved you a seat on a life boat."

You won't understand how good that is,

unless you have first been told that the ship has hit an iceberg.

Last week we looked at the last half of chapter 1

where Paul explained that pagans,

who have never heard of the God of Israel,

let alone the Lord Jesus Christ,

still have no excuse for failing to thank and glorify the creator God.

And because they fail to give thanks to God,

God gives them over to the desires of their hearts,

and that leads to lives of utter depravity.

But not everyone who is not a believer in the one true God  
leads a life of total dissipation.

There are some non believers whose lives look exemplary.

They are polite law abiding citizens.

They give money to good causes.

They are hospitable and friendly.

And the depraved lives of the pagans we spoke of last week horrify them as much as they horrify you and I.

If you listen to them,

you will hear them speak in shocked voices and hushed tones.

“Young people today are just not brought up well like they used to be!”

or “This country is going to the dogs.

When I was young you didn’t have to lock the door of your house.”

or “The screens are to blame.

They see it on the internet and then they copy it in their lives.”

What about these moral non believers?

These moralisers.

Will they face the wrath of God?

The bottom line says Paul is Yes.

They too stand under God’s judgement.

They too have no excuse for their wrong doing.

“Wrong doing?”

I hear you say.

Yes wrong doing.

Because Paul says that the big difference

between the moralisers and the pagans

is not in the doing,

it is in the approving.

The pagans do the wrong thing

and they approve of others who do the same.

The moralisers do the wrong thing

and they are intensely critical of others who do the same things they do.

What character traits do you find most annoying in other people?

Most people find it most annoying when their own faults are on display in the life of another person.

A chap by the name of Sigmund Freud picked up on this,

writing many centuries after the apostle Paul.

He called it projection.

Psychologically we can’t hate ourselves.

But there are things about ourselves that if we saw them,  
we wouldn't like them.

So our minds play little tricks on us.

They disguise our own imperfections

by pointing out to us those same imperfections in other people.

So that when we look at ourselves in the mirror,

we can say,

"I'm not as bad as all of them.

I must be OK actually."

Projection.

It's all about convincing yourself that you're OK.

Now the apostle Paul lived many centuries before Freud.

But it seems he got to the idea of projection first.

Rom 2:1 "You, therefore, have no excuse,

you who pass judgement on someone else,

for at whatever point you judge the other,

you are condemning yourself,

because you who pass judgement do the same things."

Now you might respond to me,

the people I know who are not believers

and yet are very moral people

don't go doing the same things that the pagans do.

They live very upright lives.

In many ways they are better than many of the folk

who come along to church.

That may well be true.

But God's standard is not the lives of the folk

who come along to church.

God's standard is perfection.

Suppose we were measuring the moral quality of people's lives,

and we were to rate them

by putting their names up on the pillar over there.

The higher up the pillar you go,

the better the moral quality of the life.  
 So say we put Vladimir Putin down near the floor –  
 and William Wilberforce the slavery abolitionist  
 or Mother Theresa of Calcutta  
 or Graeme Steins, the missionary who was burnt to death in India –  
 we'll put them up there.  
 Where would your life go?  
 You imagine in your head where your life would go.  
 And your very moral non Christian friends?  
 Would they go slightly higher?  
 At any rate,  
 they probably wouldn't make it quite up there with Mother Theresa.  
 They'd be somewhere in the middle there.  
 God's standard of morality isn't on the pillar.  
 In reality it can't be measured on that scale.  
 But for the sake of a visual illustration  
 imagine that it is 10 km up in the sky.  
 What is God going to be thinking from 10km up in the sky,  
 as humans criticise and pass judgement on each other?  
 "You should be further up the pillar.  
 You should be up here like I am."  
 God is going to be thinking.  
 "It's pretty pointless you guys arguing  
 about a few feet on the moral pillar.  
 Where you need to be is up here where I am.  
 Salvation is 10 km up into the stratosphere.  
 There's no point trying to make mileage about anything less."

In fact, when you criticise another person's behaviour,  
 all you are doing  
 is showing that you understand enough of God's standards,  
 that he is fair in using those standards on you.  
 God won't judge anyone by a standard that they don't know.  
 That's why it says in verse 12,  
 "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law,

and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.”  
If you don't know God's law,  
then God won't judge you by what you don't know.  
But he will judge you by what you do know.  
And if you stand in judgement on other people's bad behaviour,  
then you know it is bad.  
And so God can judge you by your own standard.  
And none of us even live up to our own standards –  
let alone God's standard.  
That the point of the paragraph between 2:12-16.

Many times I hear someone say something like,  
“God is kind.  
I've led a pretty good life.  
I'm sure he will let me into heaven.”  
And maybe their lives are more than half way up the moral pillar  
between Putin and Mother Theresa.  
Well it is true that God is kind.  
But it's a great mistake to think  
that because of God's kindness he won't punish sin.  
God is kind because he doesn't punish sin right now.  
He gives people a chance to turn around and go another way.  
God is kind because he sent his Son to deal with our problem.  
Sin wasn't God's problem.  
It was our problem.  
But God sacrificed much to fix our problem.  
That's very kind.  
To point to God's kindness  
as a reason to think you can escape God's judgement –  
is actually to show contempt for God's kindness.  
As the psalmist cries out,  
Ps 86:15 “The Lord is compassionate and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in love.”  
But if God is slow to anger,  
to use his patience as an excuse to keep on sinning,

is showing contempt for God.

His kindness is to give us space to repent,  
not a licence to do our own thing.

That's what Paul says in verse 4.

2:4 “Do you show contempt

for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience,  
not realising that God’s kindness is intended  
to lead you towards repentance?”

The bottom line for those who are good in their own eyes,  
because they compare themselves with others,  
rather than looking to God for mercy

in the light of his standard of perfection,

is that all they are trying to do

is keep hold of their sin and their self respect.

They keep hold of their sin by saying,

“I don’t need to change or be forgiven

because I am better than those people over there.”

They hold on to their self respect

by simply comparing themselves favourably with others.

But from God’s vantage point 10km up in the stratosphere,

5 cm further up the pillar than the next guy is not too impressive.

They have no excuse.

They will face the wrath of God.

Are God’s own people, the Jews, any better off?

Where as the good moral person might say to himself,

“I’ll be all right because I’m better than the person over there.”

The Jewish person might say,

“I’ll be alright because I’ve been given God’s revelation.”

That is, they have the Bible to read.

They have God’s law.

If you’ve been given God’s law,

that must surely put you at an advantage,

because you know exactly what God wants.

Paul talks about having God's revelation in verse 17-24.

Then in verses 25-29

he talks about having the sign that you are part of God's people.

Circumcision was a physical sign

that a Jewish male was part of God's chosen people.

It was like the Olympic tracksuit is

for a member of the Australian Olympic team.

It's a sign that you are in.

It was a sign that God chose and gave to his people through Abraham.

It was a covenant.

That means God made a promise that he would bless his people.

And his people needed to wear the sign to the covenant,

to show that they were part of the community who were being blessed.

So the Jewish person might say,

"I'll be alright because I'm wearing in my body  
the mark of being one of God's own people."

So will having the Bible, God's revelation,

will having the sign of the covenant,

mean that the Jewish people won't face God's wrath?

Paul's answer.

No.

They might have the Bible.

But they read it and disobey it.

They read the law and then dishonour God by breaking the law.

They have the sign of the covenant

but then they break the covenant by their lives.

They might as well not be circumcised Paul says.

You see the Jewish people had an almost superstitious confidence  
in the saving power of circumcision.

They thought,

if I am wearing the sign of being part of God's chosen people,

I will be saved from his wrath.

It doesn't matter about my life.

Think back to the Olympic tracksuit.  
If you train really hard and go to the national trials,  
and make the team you will be given the tracksuit.  
But if you steal the tracksuit,  
you have the tracksuit.  
But you won't be going to Paris 2024.  
Your life does matter.  
Possession of the tracksuit on its own is not enough.

There's a brand of nominal Christianity  
which resembles the Jewish thinking that Paul has been speaking of.  
Our sign of being part of the covenant community is not circumcision –  
it's baptism.  
If you are baptised you are a member of the church –  
and the church is now the chosen people of God.  
And there are many nominal Christians  
who place an almost superstitious confidence  
in the saving power of baptism.  
They bring their children for baptism  
and they think,  
“Right it's done now.  
They have the Olympic tracksuit.  
They have the sign that shows  
that they are part of the chosen people of God.  
It's all fixed.  
On the last day they will be saved.”  
Nothing could be further from the truth.  
Baptism is a sign of being part of God's chosen people, the church.  
But not every member of the church will be recognised on the last day.  
Within the visible church is an invisible church.  
The members of the church who truly follow the Lord Jesus.  
Merely signing yourself up for the visible church is easy.  
I've made it a bit more difficult by telling parents  
they have to do Christianity Explored with me  
before I will baptise their kids.



But the bottom line is,  
 it's still easy.  
 Three nights of your life is not much.  
 That's what it takes to be part of the visible church.  
 But to be part of the invisible church costs your whole life.  
 It means radically giving your heart to the Lord Jesus.

To paraphrase Paul's words in verses 28-29,  
 "A person is not a Christian if they are only one outwardly,  
 nor is baptism merely outward and physical.  
 No a person is a Christian if they are one inwardly,  
 and baptism is baptism of the heart,  
 by the Spirit, not by the written code.  
 Such a person's praise is not from other people,  
 but from God."

Sometimes people ask me,  
 "Does it worry you  
 that hardly any people bring their children for baptism any more?"  
 The answer is,  
 that's not what worries me.  
 If they were bringing their kids for baptism and doing nothing else,  
 that would only be a false comfort for them.  
 They would be kidding themselves that they are in,  
 when actually they are out.  
 What worries me is how few kids  
 are part of the Christian community Sunday by Sunday.  
 Being taught to love Jesus at Trinity kids.  
 What worries me  
 is how few kids say prayers with their parents each day.  
 What worries me  
 is how few kids have Bible stories read to them at bed time.  
 If those things were happening,  
 then the baptisms would follow.  
 And more importantly,

the Baptisms would actually be signs of something that is real in the heart of the child.

The minister of Christ Church Ormond when I was a teenager used to say,

“A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality.”

It's one of those pat little definitions you might have learnt in a catechism.

Well, if the inward and spiritual reality is not there, the sign has no value.

Paul has now been through every sort of person.

The Gentile person who knows nothing of God and follows the desires of their hearts.

The Gentile person who is a good law abiding citizen who is horrified by those who are not.

The Jewish person who thinks that their possession of God's word and God's covenant sign of membership will get them across the line.

And his conclusion is stark.

All will face God's wrath.

You might well ask the question then,

"What's the point of being part of the people of God then?"

What's the point of being a Jew in OT times?

What the point of being part of the church now?

What's the point of being circumcised then or baptised now?

If these things can't save you, is there a point to them?

If all are alike facing God's wrath,

What's the advantage of possessing God's Law?

You can't follow it,

so what's the point of having it?

Paul comes to that question in the first part of chapter 3.

3:1-2 "What advantage then is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?"

Much in every way!

First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God."

Possession of the word of God is a great spiritual advantage.

None of us can be saved by good behaviour.

We can only be saved by trusting in the promises of God

and then by living by those promises.

But as Paul will say later in Romans

Rom 10:17 "Faith comes from hearing the message,

and the message is heard through the word about Christ."

Possession of the very words of God is a great advantage.

Because those words give you the message to put your trust in.

What advantage is there in being part of the church?

Growing up in this community?

You will hear the message over and over again.

You will have other people around you, encouraging you to trust it.

Everyone faces God's wrath.

But this is not a council of despair.

Apart from Jesus it would be.

We have nowhere else to go.

There is nowhere else to go.

You can't compare yourself to others and say I'm better than them.

That's arguing about a couple of centimetres up the pole.

God is in heaven.

And the only way to get there

is to embrace God's kindness in Jesus.