

No Excuse

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Preacher: Megan Curlis-Gibson

[0 : 00] Up on the screen is one artist's depiction of the Apostle Paul. It's from a calendar of religious art that I've found.

Now, obviously we don't have any idea whether he actually looked like this, plus given some of the insults that we can read between the lines that his opponents were levelling at him in some of his letters that he was weak or small.

Maybe this is kind of too strong and noble a depiction. But as I looked at this painting of the Apostle Paul, it really got me thinking.

Imagine what it would be like to visit this man, the Apostle Paul, in his study or in prison or during his last years in house arrest in Rome and have conversations with him about the things of God.

Imagine that. To experience his passion for spreading the gospel of God, the gospel that we heard last week from Romans 1, 1-17, that is attested to by the Scriptures, that it's about the Lord Jesus Christ, that has as its scope all the nations of the world, that brings about the obedience of faith and that has as its ultimate goal the glory of God in Christ.

[1 : 32] Imagine what it would be like to knock on the door and have him look up from reading the Scriptures or from dictating to Silas or giving directions to Phoebe to deliver this letter to the Roman Christians.

Or imagine finding him deep in prayer for the churches that he'd planted across the Gentile world, just as he said he often was for the church in Rome, even though he'd never been there.

And then imagine him asking you to take a seat and to tell him what was on your mind. Imagine having the opportunity to ask him to apply the truths that God had revealed to him to 21st century issues, to ask him the burning questions of our time.

Well, as we read today's passage in Romans 1, 18-32, I think we do indeed have this opportunity, this privilege.

Its themes are absolutely relevant to our world today. And its structure, in fact, lends itself very nicely to a bit of a question and answer session with the Apostle Paul.

[2 : 49] So I thought tonight we would unpack this passage, probably not absolutely every bit of it because it's so full, but we'd unpack this passage in conversation with the Apostle Paul.

We can have that picture off now, thanks. And I think we'll start with Paul breaking the ice back at verse 16 of chapter 1 because Paul just can't keep his passion for the gospel to himself, can he?

So we've come in and he says, you know, I'm not ashamed of the gospel. And we say, why not, Paul? And Paul says, because it's the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

And we say, how so, Paul? And he says, because in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. And at this point, I think he turns to us with awe in his voice.

And he says, friend, in the gospel, God gives to us what he demands from us, a right standing before him.

[4 : 01] And we say, why do we need this righteousness from God, Paul? And then Paul begins his answer to us in our passage today, starting at verse 18.

We need this righteousness from God because, or for, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

Right. So we need the gospel to escape God's wrath. That's the problem. But what do you mean, the wrath of God, Paul?

Can a loving God really be angry? And this question might take us on a bit of a tangent from our text, but don't you think it's such an important question for our world today?

I think particularly for baby boomers, maybe my parents' generation, this is a question that is like always on the agenda.

[5 : 10] I'm not interested in this hellfire and brimstone, this God that would punish. No. Doesn't the Bible say that God is love? I think what the Apostle Paul would explain to us using the entirety of the scriptures is that the wrath of God is an essential corollary, an essential part of his holiness, his justice, and his love.

He would show us that God's anger, as it is taught in scripture, is not, is never, a petty, egotistical, uncontrolled, vindictive, malicious, or spiteful emotion.

It's the absolutely righteous response of a pure and holy God to sin and evil. Just think, if God was indifferent to evil, if he just laughed at the injustice and the atrocities in this world, kind of like a parent just laughing or ignoring and doing nothing when their kids are just destroying the neighbor's property and torturing their dog, let alone if God ignored the affront to his glory and majesty that humanity's rebellion is to him, then he would no longer be a good or loving God.

It is essential that true goodness and true love are angry, are righteously indignant against evil and sin.

And so, in revealing or enacting his wrath against humanity, God shows us not only that he is holy, but also that he is powerful to crush evil forever.

[7 : 16] He will do it and he will not delay. But with his characteristic insight, I think then Paul would kind of look at us and say, friend, is your issue less with the idea of God's wrath but more with the idea that it could be directed at you?

Don't we always want justice for others but mercy for ourselves? Isn't that how it goes? When it looks like God's anger is going to be directed against Hitler and Bin Laden, Hussein at the end of time, yeah, we're fine with that.

That's good. That's important that a holy God punishes evil. But when it's against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth and by this, Paul really does seem to have everyone in mind.

and that's certainly the conclusion that he comes to at the end of this kind of argument in chapter 3, we're all under God's wrath.

Then it begins to be a bit more problematic. I don't want to put words in your mouth but I'm imagining that we might then start to backpedal a little and answer something like this, yeah, well, Paul, I mean, for really bad people, okay, and for those who've heard and rejected the gospel, okay, but what about the people who've never heard about God?

[8 : 48] What about, you know, those undiscovered tribes in the heart of the Amazon rainforest? And, well, in fact, seeing we're talking about Jews and Gentiles, what about the Gentiles who never had the law of God given to them?

How can God hold these people accountable? How can his wrath be poured out upon all of them? And Paul would answer, from our passage today, verse 20, actually, friend, they too are without excuse.

And I think then he'd say to us, Romans 19 and 20, for what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them.

Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made, so they are without excuse.

So then we say back to Paul, so what he's saying is that God has made it possible for all people to know about him and to know in some way that they should worship him and give him thanks.

[10 : 09] just by looking at the creation and how amazing and intricate and ordered it is and realizing that they are the recipient of abundant blessing.

And I think we'd say, you know, kind of like Psalm 19 where it says the heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech nor are there words. Their voice is not heard yet. Their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.

And I don't know about you but at this point I'm feeling pretty good about quoting the Psalms to the Apostle Paul. But Paul answers, yes, but my point is that it's not simply possible to know that God exists and that he is worthy of worship.

My point is that this truth has been known and understood by everyone on some level.

[11 : 18] But this knowledge is actively suppressed in humanity's desire to do wickedness. Paul is saying I'm not suggesting that people can be saved by observing creation alone, but I'm saying that God has not left himself without a witness in creation and in doing good for people.

So, therefore, they all are without excuse. For, verse 21, though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.

I think at this point we could share with Paul just how strongly that resonates with us in our society. Consider, for example, the almost unquestioned belief that the universe and human life in particular evolved by the sheer forces of matter, time and chance, naturalistic or atheistic evolution.

God as creator and designer is simply ruled out whenever the origins of the universe are taught, and even when it takes far more effort to exclude God than include him in the equation.

William Dembski, in his book *The Design Inference*, points out that many well-known scientists must constantly suppress the suspicion that there is design in the universe, despite being faced with irreducible complexity every day.

[13 : 21] For example, he quotes Richard Dawkins, an arch Darwinian and author of the more recent *The God Delusion*, who says, biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.

And he quotes Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of DNA, who says, biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but rather evolved.

It's taking so much more work to keep God out of the equation. Keep in mind that it looks like it was designed, but it really wasn't. This is suppression of the truth, isn't it?

It's starting with a decision to rule out God. And Paul says, you don't have to be a scientist to do this. We all do this in some way or another because we want to live in wickedness and ungodliness.

That is, we don't want to give glory to God or give thanks to him like dependent creatures. We want to pretend we're independent and keep the glory for ourselves.

[14 : 41] So I think the Apostle Paul would respond to us, yes, that type of scientific humanism that you describe is a form of idolatry, isn't it? It puts the true God out of the picture and holds up something else in his place, human potential, intellectual achievement.

And then he'd go on, I think, in verse 22, claiming to be wise, they became fools and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Let's face it, human beings were created to worship something. It's built into our very nature. And so if we, in wickedness and ungodliness, suppress the truth of God's existence and his claim to our worship, even when we've lost the ability to realise that we're doing it because our hearts are so dark, our thinking is so futile, we find ourselves drawn to worship something else.

We exchange right worship for wrong worship. The Israelites did it with the golden calf. The surrounding nations did it with all kinds of gods that were shaped just like Paul said, you know, birds, reptiles, four-footed animals.

Adam and Eve, of course, were tempted into worshipping themselves. And from there, the big three, money, sex, power, have been worshipped in every time and in every place and you just have to turn on the TV.

[16 : 38] So let's ask another question. If this is the case, Paul, we can see why the wrath of God needs to be enacted against humanity.

Yes. But how will that happen? Or is it already happening? Again, I think Paul would take us to another part of the scriptures to begin his answer.

He would say, the full and final wrath of God in judgment will be executed on the last day, when all of this will be wrapped up.

But the wrath of God is actually being revealed and enacted from heaven now. It is being revealed in the reality of death, that each human being that is ever born will die.

It is being revealed in the futility of creation itself, in disasters, earthquakes, famines, plagues, disease. And then Paul would say, coming back to his argument in this chapter one of Romans, God's wrath is revealed as he gives humans over to their sinfulness.

[17 : 58] Take a look, if you will, with me in verses 23 to 28. And see the refrain. Because humans have taken part in the great exchange, that is, exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images, the truth about God for a lie, and not even seeing fit to acknowledge God, verse 24 says, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves.

angels. Verse 26, God gave them up to degrading passions. Verse 28, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.

Each of these, this refrain is a parallel, telling us the same thing. The wrath of God has been revealed as God gives humanity over to their sin.

God's way has always been the way to life and to wholeness, to true humanness, the good life.

To turn from this way is to enter a spiral of disorder and degradation, leading to a life that is far, far less than what God intended it to be.

[19 : 32] And part of God's judgment upon humanity, having chosen this way, is to not only allow them to go the way they've chosen, kind of like just letting go of a rope that was tethering a boat in a really strong current and just letting it drift downstream to wherever it would end up.

Not just that, although I think that's a significant part of it, but he, actively, I think it says, gives them up. He says, no, okay, go.

Go. I'm giving you up to what you have chosen and it is part of the judgment of God against sin. God. So let's ask Paul the question of what this looks like in human experience.

We've already seen that human thinking has become futile. Human hearts have become darkened, unable to have any light without the gospel of God.

but now we see in verses 24 and 26 that there is a very kind of core physical component to this sinfulness sexual impurity the degrading or dishonouring of the human physical and sexual body that God has created for a good purpose and Paul goes on to say the most significant example of this is homosexual practice we read in verses 26 and 27 their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural and in the same way also the men giving up natural intercourse with women were consumed with passion for one another men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error well this is really where the questions start coming don't they wait a minute Paul why would you choose homosexuality as your key example of the result of our exchange of God's glory for idolatry and lies the big exchange

[21 : 57] I mean homosexuality is a really big ticket issue in our day Paul it's got a lot of heat there's massive lobbying by gay groups in the media and in politics and in medicine particularly in psychiatry homosexual couples want to adopt kids and use IVF and get married in the church we're dealing with very divisive issues concerning the place of homosexual people within the ordained ministry at the communion table in the fellowship in general and some people call you Paul a homophobe or out of touch or they form elaborate arguments to show that your teaching from God is irrelevant today because in your society homosexuals didn't have loving relationships stable relationships like they do in ours plus you didn't have the scientific evidence that we have what should we do with what you're telling us Paul well perhaps Paul would answer in these ways first of all Paul would say

I think let me tell you about my context my society homosexual practice is very much part of my society too and not just in a way that is exploitative or that is linked with pedophilia or abusive or connected with temple prostitution although all those things certainly take place homosexual marriages are not unknown in my society in fact I believe the Emperor Nero has participated in something very much like that homosexual love is celebrated by our philosophers as life-giving and healthy yes as a Jew I have always been taught that this practice is wrong it's abhorrent to God but I'm not out of touch true we don't talk about gay genes and the church isn't really conflicted on the issue at the moment but I don't think our society is that much different to yours when you read this passage please know that what I'm describing covers a multitude of motives and situations for the practice of homosexuality

I'm not talking about a specific abusive or a pedophilia type relationship second of all I think Paul would say let me explain to you the theological point that I am making here what God is saying to us is that sin is unbelievably extensive and its repercussions are unbelievably massive humans have violated not simply laws given at a specific point in human history but they have violated the very structure of the created order itself including right gender relations Genesis 1 and 2 teach us this divine intention in this matter humans male and female are created in God's image and given charge over the non-human creation humans humans male and female are commanded to be fruitful they are to celebrate in their male plus female complementarity the abundant life generating capacity of God's good world and act together male and female as stewards of creation using their differences to support and balance each other in these tasks working together gender is a core part of God's design males and females are different and somehow

God's design is that the coming together of like and unlike and navigating this type of relationship images God best to the cosmos furthermore the covenant love between a man and a woman points to the covenant love between God and humanity Paul would say I've spoken elsewhere that a man and wife are like a symbol of Christ in the church but he'd say I'm not saying that an individual human being needs to be married to be whole in themselves and to point people to God no Jesus wasn't married the apostle Paul would say I'm not married but as a whole the human race male and female images together the covenant faithfulness the creative fruitfulness and the relational character of the Trinitarian

God of the universe it's really important and as an aside this is what Paul means when he speaks of natural relations in verse 23 he's not talking about what seems natural for a particular person or what's in their genes or how they were born but he's talking about the divine intention and he's not just talking about he's not talking about a kind of a scientific naturalism that well there's kind of physical reasons he's talking about God's natural the divine intention God's good design from the very beginning so when people today say to us that to be gay feels like the most natural thing in the world for them we must be able to gently explain that despite their experience even if it is extremely powerful

[28 : 38] God's intention for humanity as a whole is not homosexual partnerships that's not the divine natural if you like and so it cannot be God's intention no matter how natural it feels for an individual that this be their sexual expression thirdly I think Paul would want to draw our attention to how this passage should be read he would say I have not written this with an individualistic modern mindset but with a larger kind of corporate overarching perspective I'm talking about the human race as a whole I'm not suggesting that everyone who feels sexually attracted to someone of the same gender has got to that point through committing specific acts of idolatry or that those who find themselves in a homosexual lifestyle have arrived there by a deliberate choice to give up heterosexual possibilities

I'm not saying that the brokenness in individual human experience is now so complex and so deep that it is often beyond our ability to analyze it it is true to say that many people have not consciously chosen to have romantic or sexual feelings for people of the same gender and so in our friendships with such people we must make sure that we're not constantly admonishing or simplistically labeling or constantly condemning and if we know Christian brothers and sisters who are struggling with this issue and I hope that you will at some stage of your life know Christian brothers and sisters who are struggling with this issue because that means that they've been able to stay in relationship with people in the church if we are friends with Christian brothers and sisters who are struggling and who have been able to share that with us let's remember that

Christian discipleship has always been a long journey and transformation by the Holy Spirit is always in God's time and in God's way homosexuality is no different to any other struggle in this regard in fact it would do us good to remember that each of us married single with heterosexual or homosexual feelings with temptations to have an affair outside of marriage to sleep with a boyfriend or girlfriend before marriage all other range of sexual action outside of marriage are called by the Lord Jesus to remain chaste outside of that male female covenant marriage relationship and that will be a struggle for all of us all of our life long for some it will be harder than others because of the strength of their desires they may not ever change but that's what we are called to walk with each other through calling each of us to chastity that is to celibacy outside of marriage whether you have heterosexual or homosexual or whatever feelings well before I make my final point

I want to acknowledge that we've just touched on this issue tonight and it is one which will no doubt be pushing some buttons be painful for people here tonight you know you may struggle with this personally you may know a friend or a number of friends or family members who are in a homosexual lifestyle can I encourage you not to leave here feeling frustrated or upset but come and speak to me or Paul or Wayne or make a time to see us at another stage so that we can work through some of this stuff so that we can talk about questions so we can deal with some of the many issues that I haven't been able to talk about tonight finally I believe that Paul would want us to know most strongly in this that this passage is in the context of the power of the gospel of God for salvation even though

Paul has singled out homosexual practice as indicative of the state of Gentile humanity before God how everything is out of joint under wrath given over to sin his eventual conclusion in chapter 3 is that all people are under God's wrath there is no one who is righteous not even one we are all alike before God and in fact we haven't looked at the last five verses have we in this third parallel of the results of the great exchange in this passage and here in verses 28 to 32 Paul broadens the net to catch all of us up under the wrath of God as Vaughn was alluding to at the start of our service today reading from verse 28 and since they did not see fit to acknowledge God God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done they were filled with every kind of wickedness evil covetousness malice full of envy murder strife deceit craftiness they are gossip slanderers god haters insolent haughty boastful inventors of evil rebellious toward parents foolish faithless heartless ruthless they know

[35 : 19] God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them well it doesn't take much to see that if we were to exclude those who struggle with one of these things in this list from the church that most of our seats would be empty and you probably wouldn't be getting a sermon either the good news of the gospel is that even people like this the worst I don't know about you but if there was a town that had all these people living in it I mean it would be the worst even these people even those who know God's decree and yet not only break it but applaud others who do

I'm thinking kind of you know big brother and all that kind of stuff even though they we sit under the wrath of God we can by faith receive the righteousness that God requires so we come back to Paul's great passion that he wouldn't be able to share this stuff with you or I sitting there in his study in his prison cell without saying this is not the end do you know the gift of God that he offers to you right now instead of remaining trapped under God's wrath because of our participation in the great exchange of God's glory for idolatry and lies we can each exchange our filthy sinfulness for the pure righteousness of Christ so let me encourage you to hold on to that hope as we travel together through the next few chapters of

Romans as we travel together as disciples in a broken world and as we travel together considering our own state before a holy God Amen Amen