
Prayers

To God

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for the gift of this day, which brings with it the fresh promise of all that is possible as Your Holy Spirit works in and through us. Even if we never know the full picture of what You can do through us, Lord God, may we accomplish with vigour everything You have given us to do. May we be fulfilled, and may Your eternal plans be completed. Thank You, Heavenly Father, AMEN

For Self

Pray about your money.

Pray about how you handle your daily expenses

Pray about what you give to others

Pray about keeping a record of what you spend

Pray about the money you save

Pray that God's will is done through your money

For others

Scan the Internet for information about China, and the lives of people there. Have a look at anything you can find about the Chinese church. Look also at the situation in Tibet.

Pray for China and all its people. Pray that God will bring a renewal of faith in Jesus to this great country.

Meditation

*Sometimes, when we are tired of the life we have been given,
Our strength from inner spiritual reserves appears sapped;
We lose hold of the things of God, things we normally hold dear.*

*The promises You gave have held, but we question them,
We try to deal with things without giving them over to You,
Not realising that in faithfulness You wait upon our trust.*

*Hold us, do not let us fail the faith we have held dear.
Remove our guilt, calm our nerves when touched by fear;
Speak swiftly when we need Your Word of graciousness.*

For real discipleship works when in distress we trust our all to You.

Bible Passage

Romans 1:18-25

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and evil of those who suppress the truth through their wrongdoing. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is known by them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities which are His eternal power and divinity, are capable of being sensibly understood within the things He has made; so they are without excuse.

²¹ This is because despite knowing God, they did not honour Him as God or give Him thanks, but their thinking became speculative, and their senseless hearts were darkened. ²² Whilst they claimed to be wise, they became foolish, ²³ and exchanged the glory of God Immortal for perishable images resembling people, birds, four legged animals or reptiles; ²⁴ and because of the passions of their hearts, God has therefore given them over to the shameful way they treat each other's bodies. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served what was created rather than the Creator, who is to be praised for ever! Amen.

Bible study Review

In yesterday's passage from Romans, we read one of Paul's most important and profound explanations of the Gospel. It is highly significant, but it is only a summary of the Gospel and forms part of the letter's introduction. In truth, what Paul says about the Gospel really begins in our passage today, and there is no doubt that it takes us on a sharp turn, away from the wonders of the Gospel to the stark condition of humanity. Paul now embarks on a long explanation of the Gospel which continues for many chapters, arguably, up to chapter 8 at least.

As Paul develops his letter, he seems to have a number of questions in his mind. For example, if the 'Good News' of God is clear, generous and freely available, why is it that people still fail to understand it and reject it? Also, why does the work of Jesus provide God's Gospel answer to the human condition in this particular time and place? Another pressing question is this; how does God judge those who have never heard the Gospel? And there are more. Paul's starting place is an analysis of the world and the people within it, and the reason why people fail to perceive God.

Behind all Paul says here, He portrays a battle between good and evil in the world, with God fighting hard against 'evils of those who suppress the truth' (1:18) of the Good News of Christ. This is no casual battle over personal issues, as we so often interpret spiritual warfare; it is the eternal battle between good and evil, sharply focussed in God's intent to press home the Gospel of Jesus Christ and present it to all humanity. Everything that opposes the Gospel is subject to God's righteous anger, or his 'wrath'. Now, we might think that Satan should be blamed for wrongdoing in the world, and the Bible does indeed speak about this elsewhere. However, this passage faces us with a very different interpretation of all that is wrong in the world. The object of God's wrath is not Satan or the principalities and powers, but people who choose evil rather than good (1:19-25).

The analysis Paul gives of the human condition is startling, even today. He says that good and evil are readily observable in the world (1:20), but people choose to go their own way rather than follow God's benevolent and righteous pathways. As a result, they are bound by the

consequences of their choices, and their ability to discern the difference between good and evil is consequently reduced ('darkened' – 1:21). When this happens, people wander so far from the real God that they tend to hold up to worship common created things found in the world rather than the God who made them (1:23), or indeed, follow their imagination (1:21,22). The consequence of this is that people end up being consumed by their own desires and passions (1:24), often against their own better judgements. Paul's summary of the fallen world is stark; those who in this way choose what is evil 'exchange the truth about God for a lie' (1:25).

There is no difference between what Paul says of his own time and our own day. The Gospel is still present amongst us, and we still live in a world of sin and of much evil. Sometimes, because of the success we have today through our own effort, people believe that the problem of evil is a religious myth, and humanity is responsible for its own condition and future. But this is just an example of exactly what Paul says here will happen when people forget God and go their own ways. The evils that afflict humanity are heavily camouflaged in today's world, but they are an the enemy of the whole world. Our only salvation from this curse comes from Jesus. Paul's explanations here are blunt and disarmingly frank, but the Gospel he presents is set precisely against this background.

Paul is only just beginning to launch into this subject and has further to go, as we will see tomorrow, though he offers a brief sentence of praise to God Almighty at the end of our passage. People have many questions about the Gospel, and he is only just beginning to address these and offer some answers. As we delve deeper into Romans, we will have to engage with more difficult questions about our world, about life, about God and even about our own lives. Some feel threatened by such questioning and the exploring of faith, but if we are to study Romans, then we must rise to the challenge! This letter of Paul requires that we search into the deepest truths about the God who has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Going Deeper

What happened to the world?

If you read the Bible through from the beginning, you will find that there is not a great deal of attention paid to the whole world after the first eleven chapters of Genesis. These opening chapters deal with global issues, but once we get into chapter 12, the emphasis is on Abraham and the story of the people who will become Israel.

Then, as we move into the New Testament, the story of Jesus is, quite properly, centre stage. This mostly takes place within Israel of the day, and Jesus occasionally moves outside his own land to meet other people, Gentiles (see Matt 10:6, but also John 4). He makes it plain that His mission is for the whole world, but His task starts with His own people (Matt 15:24). Then, after Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the book of Acts describes how the Gospel breaks out of its Jewish beginnings and comes to the rest of the world. Now, for the first time in the Bible sequence since Genesis, the whole world takes centre stage!

The world in which the Gospel was first preached was the vast Roman Empire which had developed from the previous Greek Empire and culture, and life in that day was regarded as highly civilised. However, the closer you look at the surviving written records of the day, the more you read of depravity and sinfulness, and all the evils that have bedevilled human society throughout history. The Roman culture increasingly demanded belief in the divinity of the Emperor, and a wide range of religions tolerated and exercised alongside each other, on the

basis that everyone could worship who they wanted, providing that did not hurt anyone else! It sounds familiar! But this is not the only connecting place between Paul's letter and the world of our own day.

The wrath of God

In our passage today, Paul uses a word that has become a difficult one for many people, and many Christians, the 'wrath' of God (1:18). What does this mean? You may well have heard this expression, and you may be one of those for whom it is hard to accept that God has this 'side' to Him; apparently angry and vengeful. However, we are wrong to think that the 'wrath of God' means an emotive response by God of unjustifiable anger, as we would think of human 'wrath'.

This term describe the fact that God, who loves His world, has been rejected by the people He has made. Now consider this. When we are rejected, we feel hurt, and may feel a degree of justifiable anger against any who may, for example, have misrepresented us. There are proper ways for us to deal with such things of course, but this is an example of what we might call 'wrath', and the same is true of God. God's wrath, as this passage explains, however, is not some vengeful deed such as throwing people into hell-fire and damnation. The passage as a whole describes God's wrath as His anger and upset at the downward spiral of human depravity which people choose for themselves (1:21-24).

Paul argues that God created a world infused with all possible evidence of God's love and graciousness; His 'invisible qualities which are His eternal power and divinity' (1:20).

Underlying this is the same basic Jewish belief found in the first chapters of Genesis, in which God is described as being good and as pleased with the world He has made; this of course is before the 'Fall'. For Paul the world is tainted by the evil of a universal 'fall', by which people choose to go their own way, just as Adam and Eve did (he will mention them later on in the letter – see chapter 6f.). People give in to temptation and find themselves drawn ever deeper into the wickedness and lies of the serpent of Genesis, and so they must bear the consequences of being thrown out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:20f).

In Romans, Paul describes how the choice of evil compounds, proceeding from one wickedness to another to the point where people become consumed by their own personal interests; they are 'given over' to how they 'treat each other's bodies' (1:24). God's wrath is His reaction to people's chosen self-enslavement; He has done nothing yet, but this is indeed the true background to the Gospel message, and we had better know it!

The downward spiral of fallen humanity

This passage poses the question of whether or not there is sufficient evidence of God within creation for people to find Him and respond to Him, apart from His revelation in Christ. Paul says here that there is, and declares that people should be able to find God from the evidence before them within the world; they have 'no excuse' (1:20) for their self-centeredness. As he continues though, he seems to assume that things are not as simple as this; who will respond to the gracious love of God? Yet he does not close the door on the possibility that people might find Him 'naturally' within the world; it is a good debating point! Here, he is intent on describing the moral descent of humanity that happens when God is rejected; this is the truth of the Gentile world into which the Gospel must shed its light.

The downward spiral begins with the rejection of the idea of one God who made heaven and earth (1:18f.). At a stroke, most Gentiles, Romans, Greeks and other nationalities are therefore

at fault, for they had beliefs in countless other god's relating to everything from human fertility, war, and even the weather! As far as Paul is concerned, such were no gods but mere projections of human needs and aspirations (1:23); it is worth dwelling on what Paul might say of this today! He then highlights the speculative nature of people's religion when they turn from God; lacking in substance, 'their senseless minds were darkened' (1:21). Wisdom and folly become confused (1:22) and people begin to make up their own gods according to whatever 'image' (1:23) takes their fancy. Surely we recognise his analysis?

Finally, Paul concludes that such degradation of humanity is not only a denial of God but a denial of what it means to be fully human; it is living a 'lie' (1:25). As such, the whole world lives in a tragic state, trapped in evil and blinded by its own ways. The need for the Gospel of liberation, freedom and salvation is therefore obvious and paramount.

Application

Discipleship issues

The Gospel and other faiths?

The wide variety of beliefs people practiced in the pagan world seemed idiotic to Paul. But what about different religions today? Can we dismiss Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh or Mormon with such vigour? We must start with trying to understand what it means to speak of all humanity as having a common creation. We all come from one source, or the human spirit is almost meaningless, and this implies that if there is a god there can only be one God. We might agree on this with perhaps some Muslim scholars, but there is little ground here for any unification of the religions around today. Is there any a logical connection between the Christian faith and the Buddhist 'nirvana', which defines the future as nothing? What about the Gospel's proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven? Such arguments quickly descend into irrationality, and although every Christian is called to be loving towards every other human being, we are not called to love their beliefs. The downward spiral of humanity continues in our world as people become consumed by their own thoughts and opinions.

Salvation

Every disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who is won for the Kingdom of God out of the wickedness and sin of the world in which they live. We may find this to be a difficult analysis, for we do not see the world in which we live as that depraved. It is important, however, to remember that we often see what we allow ourselves to see, and in the western world, many of us create our own 'little' worlds, perhaps reacting only occasionally to the world in which we live, depending upon the work we do, and indeed whether we work or not. All of us need to have the courage to look outside and beyond the social and cultural worlds in which we live, and it is always good for Christians to keep abreast of what is happening throughout the world. We should be careful to try and understand what is good and what is evil in what we see, and measure it against what we believe about the God who has made it.

When we look at our world and see both good and evil, we will often be shocked by the evil, just as we may be shocked by some of what Paul says about it. We should be careful not to react against it too negatively, however, because the message of Romans is that there is an answer to the evil in the world, and this is found in Jesus. Consequently, our response to evil must never be to rail against it or to tut-tut' about it as if the answer to it was gossip. Our

response must be to see that this is precisely where the Gospel needs to be preached, and exactly where the testimony of faith needs to be spoken and lived. There is a reason why Paul says elsewhere in Romans, that Christ did not die to condemn the world, but to save it (Romans 8:28-39).

Ideas for what to do

- In order to gain a better understanding of the evil within the world, try attending a local magistrates court or public law courts for an hour or two. You will observe all manner of things about your world for yourself rather than from TV.
- If possible, spend some time watching people in a train station, in the street, or in some public place, and reflect on the character of society and what it does to people. Ask yourself, is evil a choice or an imposition, or both?

Questions for groups

1. *Discuss what you think is meant by the 'wrath of God' within this passage.*
2. *What can we observe of the nature of God within the world, and is it good? Do the horrible things we see in the world reflect God, or what else?*
3. *What do you regard to be the worst form of rebellion against God in the world today? Check what you think against Paul's list above*

Final Prayer

**You grant power to us to do Your will, O Lord, and we praise You for this. Lead us on to be able and willing to do more for you as our lives unfold, and so be ever more fruitful in Your Kingdom. We pray this in confidence, O Lord, because of Your gracious love.
AMEN**