

**AIM:**

**Theme: God's anger is shown to be righteous by our universal sin, and his mercy shown to be righteous by his sacrifice in Christ**

**INTRO:**

Anger is a dangerous emotion: for some people the red mist descends and they lash out with their tongues or their fists, only to regret it moments later. For others anger is a cold fog that closes them down: what makes you think I'm angry? You tell me why I should be angry! In either form, the bible warns us of the dangers:

James 1.20 my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. We should know ourselves well enough to know what triggers our anger, and that we can be judgmental, or hypocritical. We need to learn to control our tempers, but anger is not always wrong: it may be a right response to evil or injustice. Jesus was without sin, but he could be angry- confronted with the stubborn disbelief of the Pharisees, the corruption of the Temple. There is such a thing as righteous anger.

So can God be angry? According to classical myth, the pagan gods of Olympus all had nasty tempers: you did not want to make Hera jealous, or insult Apollo's mother, or challenge Poseidon's rule of the sea, or lie to Zeus -or a thunderbolt would be coming your way. But what about the one true God - the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? The true and living God is always holy and loving. He cannot lose his temper, but he can be angry, for anger is not the opposite of love. The opposite of love is indifference. Anger is the flip-side of love - offended and wounded at evil and injustice, and moved to action.

Today we continue our series through Paul's great letter to the church in Rome. Last week Paul declared his confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which he defined as the revelation of righteousness - that God is righteous in character, and acts righteously in order to bring us into a right relationship with him, of love, grace and peace. Like a lofty mountain, Romans will give us an unparalleled view of the glory and the love of God revealed in Christ, but in order to reach that summit, we must climb the steep slope of chapters 1-3, and face the harsh reality of our sinfulness. The slope is slippery and sharp, so we need to keep our eyes on that summit, and hold fast to the gospel - like a rope that will keep us safe from falling. Paul begins our reading by saying, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for

salvation to everyone who believes" and at the end of ch 3 he will develop this gospel hope:

"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Rom 3.21-24) p1131 Paul's aim in these chapters is to prove to us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and deserve God's anger, but that through Christ God is able to make us right and bring us to the summit. He will show that all humanity -both pagan Gentiles and religious Jews- has sinned: some sin is blatant and obvious, other sin is more subtle and insidious. But today we will focus what makes God angry, how God expresses his anger, and how we can be reconciled to enjoy peace with God.

**POINT 1: WHAT MAKES GOD ANGRY?**

Paul launches straight in in v.18: The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness (unrighteousness) of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

There are two things that make God angry with people - our godlessness - we have broken our relationship with him- and our wickedness - our failure to love to other people, and to hurt them by act or neglect.

God created us all to know and love him: he has given us clear and plain evidence of his power and goodness in all that he has made: vv19-20

"what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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." As Psalm 19 puts it,

'The heavens declare the glory of God. Day after day they pour forth speech: they may not use words, yet their voice goes into all the earth'.

Whether you look at the starry skies, or the ocean deeps, through a telescope or a microscope, the intricate order and balance of creation cries out: there is a good and wise creator!

But some deny there is anything or anyone up there. others think there might be, but forget and ignore God. How can they be so deaf and blind? Paul says: it is a deliberate and wicked suppression of the truth, and there is no excuse. Paul does not here explain who was the first to turn away from God- was it Satan, Adam? - but it is a sin repeated in every generation, and every individual, and godlessness offends and angers God. It is more a moral rebellion than an intellectual failure; v.21

although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. Creatures have an obligation to their Creator. God deserves our praise and our thanks. And Paul goes on to explain the consequences of this rebellion: “their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” How did humanity come to worship gross idols? What a wretched exchange - God’s immortal glory for crude images of wood and stone! Why should God not be angry? What Paul outlines here is a brief history of human religion - and it is not flattering. We do not see a gradual evolution or progress from crude paganism to sophisticated philosophy but rather the opposite. And we see the same dynamic in our supposedly progressive society. As GK Chesterton said: “When a man stops believing in God he doesn’t then believe in nothing, he believes anything.”

So God is quite right to be angry - but how does he express it?

#### **POINT 2 HOW DOES GOD EXPRESS HIS ANGER?**

Next week we will be reminded that there will be a final day of judgment, “the wrath to come”, but here Paul talks here in the present tense.

“The Wrath of God **is being revealed** from heaven”. There are warning signs for us to see, if we are willing and able, so that we can repent and return to him.

We sometimes think that we can spot God’s anger in the thunderbolt - the disaster. Jesus had to tell his disciples repeatedly that this is not true. Neither the man born blind nor his parents were being punished directly by God. (Jn 9) The Galileans killed by Pilate in a riot, or crushed by a collapsing tower were not worse sinners than anyone else (Lk 13). God’s anger does not work like that. But Paul describes Wrath being Revealed in three stages: each marked with the phrase “God gave them over”.

This is a passive action, of divine self-control: God steps back from us, and turns away. If we will not say “Thy will be done”, and if we will not honour or thank him, then God says, “Your will be done. Try life without my sustaining presence and wisdom.” Like the Father of the prodigal Son in the famous parable, God lets us go to a far country, and try wild living, until we come to our senses. And God does it with tears of grief in his eyes:

“Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.” (Jer 9)

v.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.

The first bitter fruit of our rebellion against God is that we degrade our own bodies in sexual impurity. God created us male and female, and commanded

us to be fruitful and multiply. Human sexuality is his good and beautiful design. The bible unashamedly uses sexual language to describe God’s love for his people - first the people of Israel, and then the whole Church are to be his bride. But we have corrupted that good gift and degraded ourselves. There has always been sexual immorality. In the 20th century, the West celebrated the Sexual Revolution, throwing off the repressive chains of bourgeoisie and Judaeo-Christian morality to discover Liberation. So how is Paradise? I’ve been reading “the Case against the Sexual Revolution” by Louise Perry, a feminist writer who makes a compelling case that the revolution has been a disaster, for women especially. Our society is marked by family breakdown, loneliness, record rates of sexually transmitted disease, and a tidal wave of hard-core porn available to all, that has rendered many unable to form meaningful relationships. We have degraded our bodies.

And Paul continues

#### **v.26 For this reason God gave them up to shameful lusts”.**

These are the most controversial verses in the bible at the moment, for they address the topic of homosexuality, and I know that several members of our congregation have friends and beloved family members in same- sex relationships. So let us tread carefully

Paul is trying to demonstrate that God is right to be angry at the universal sinfulness of humanity. He is not looking for a particular group to scapegoat to blame, but is seeking to illustrate his thesis.

There have been various attempts to explain these verses away, and there is a fair summary of these attempts in ch 13 of the LLF book - there’s a link on the notice sheet. The trouble is that most of these explanations contradict each other. It is true that the Greco-Roman world, and the city of Rome in particular was a cess-pit of vice - many Jewish writers and some pagan writers expressed their disgust for it. A male Roman with means could find sexual gratification in almost any way he wanted: he could rape his female and male slaves, from the youngest age, at will, or buy such services on any street corner. Bisexuality seems to have been their cultural norm. So some say that Paul is actually only condemning this, and had no knowledge of faithful, stable and loving relationships as we see today. But there is ample evidence that such relationships were known and accepted in high society - in the dialogues of Plato, Xenophon’s Symposium; Demosthenes’s Erotic Essay; Plutarch’s Dialogue on Love; and Lucian’s Affairs of the Heart. The emperor Nero himself played the bride at two mock gay marriages. Others argue that what Paul is describing is hetero-sexuals engaging in same-sex activity against their true nature for a kinky change, but others argue that Paul simply had no concept of orientation: these two claims contradict each other.

The plain reading remains the simplest and best. Paul sees all same-sex intercourse as against God's design for sex as revealed in human anatomy. But Paul is not saying that this is the worst or unforgiveable sin. In 1 Corinthians 6 he reminds the Corinthians of their sordid past- some were idolaters, some adulterers, some drunkards, swindlers, some were male prostitutes and homosexual offenders, but all were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of Jesus. Those who experience sexual temptation are no more guilty or under God's personal judgment than the parents and their son born blind, or the people crushed by the tower.

And Paul's argument continues to its grim climax

**v.28 he gave them over to a depraved mind**, to do what ought not to be done.

Now Paul widens the canvas to a whole range of social evils, which are arranged more for rhetorical effect than a strict logical sequence. The NIV translation captures this nicely:

v.31 senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. And worst of all, people not only do these things, but praise and take pride in those who practise them. In the course of these verses 18-32 we see the world trampling on all God's good commandments. And this week we have seen our nation, and our parliament, losing its mind, debased by its long and persistent rejection of God's glory and word, as it has legalised abortion up to birth, and the assisted suicide of the most vulnerable members of our society, the sick and elderly. This has been a black week in our history; we have crossed a Rubicon, and will pay a terrible price. That is why the flag is flying at half mast today, and the bells did not ring this morning, and why we held a minute's silence before the confession. But my point is not that these decisions will attract God's judgment in the future, they are God's judgment, wrath and entirely justified anger upon us now. We have been given over to our own depraved and wicked ways, and we will reap a bitter harvest.

This has been a hard sermon to prepare, and hard sermon to hear, and it is almost, but not quite finished. For God reveals his wrath, not hides it in secret resentment, and he reveals it for a purpose - to bring us to repentance. And God has prepared a means to remove his anger from us and satisfy the need for justice. Look again at the safety rope of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. At the climax of this section, in ch 3.22 Paul explains how God is both right to be angry and how he can rightly forgive and make us clean:

"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are

justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood." When we repent of our sin, as individuals, as a society, then God is eager and able to wash us clean, through the blood shed for us by Jesus on the cross. As we shall sing in our next hymn:

In Christ alone, who took on flesh  
Fullness of God in helpless babe  
This gift of love and righteousness  
Scorned by the ones He came to save  
'Til on that cross as Jesus died  
The wrath of God was satisfied  
For every sin on Him was laid  
Here in the death of Christ I live.

Romans reveals God's anger, and highlights our sin in order to drive us into God's arms, to seek his mercy and grace. Perhaps this morning you have begun to see in yourself disordered thinking and desires, and to realise the depth of sin in our society. Do not despair, but turn to God in humble confession, and put your trust in his sufficient sacrifice. Then we will have peace with God who loves us, and nothing to fear.

2625 words

**Icebreaker:** Human anger is a powerful and dangerous emotion. Is it ever right to be angry? (check James 1.20, Ephesians 4.26)

Was Jesus ever angry? (Mk 3.5)

Can we speak of God's Anger/Wrath? How does this differ from human anger?

Recap: why is Paul so confident and eager to proclaim the gospel (vv 16-17)?

Look forward to Rom 3.21-26. Who needs salvation? How is it received?

Read Romans 1.18-23: What angers God?

How has God revealed himself to all humanity? See also Ps 19.1-7

How has humanity responded to the revelation of God's invisible qualities? vv 21-24

Read vv 24-32: How does God now show his anger? Note 'gave them over' in vv 24, 26, 28

vv 26-27 are hotly disputed in the church today. In holding one interpretation, are you aware of the arguments of other positions? Be sensitive to those who have a personal or family investment with issues of sexuality.

For further details read "*Living in Love & Faith*" (Church House Publishing 2020) **available online here**: see especially ch 13 the Bible and pp 289-291 (on Romans 1.26-27)

How do you see God's anger at work in the world today?

Look again at Romans 3.21-26. How does God 'deal with' his anger and save us?

Application:

Do you give thanks and honour to God daily?

Do you see disorder in your own thinking, emotions and desires?

What hope does the gospel bring? (see also Rom 7.24-25)

Pray for the nations to come to know and trust in the Lord through Christ. Pray for the church to be united in the truth of the gospel, and confident in proclaiming good news.

**MEMORY VERSE:** There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3.22-24)