

# A Problem so big, we can't see it

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Date: 28 October 2018

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[ 0 : 00 ] This passage is on page 1128, 1128 in our Bibles if you like to have them out, it may also be on the screen.

Romans chapter 1, verse 16 to verse 25. I'll just give you a moment to get there. Romans 1, 16 to 25, page 1128.

Let's read God's word. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jews, 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 will live by faith. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

[ 1 : 19 ] Since 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, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. But 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 a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

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

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator, who is forever praised.

[ 2 : 46 ] Amen. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks, Alan, very much for reading.

Good morning again. If you don't have small children, I hope you enjoyed your extra hour's sleep this morning. If you could keep your Bibles open at Romans 1, that would be a great help.

We're committed at St. Silas to working through books of the Bible chapter by chapter, because that means that we're letting God set the agenda as he speaks to us, rather than just cherry picking bits of the Bible that we enjoy more or find more comfortable.

And what's much more important than what I say for the next 25 minutes or so is that we hear God speak to us. So let's ask God to speak. Let's pray for his help.

Heavenly Father, in a world of untruths and fake news and lies, we thank you that you are a God of truth who has given us your word of truth.

[ 3 : 49 ] We thank you for your gospel of good news. Heavenly Father, we know that to grasp the news about Jesus as good news, we have to be willing to hear your word of truth about ourselves and the great danger that our world is in.

So we pray that you will give us ears to hear your word, eyes to see these realities and hearts that are ready to accept your word for Jesus name's sake.

Amen. This is a really hard hitting section of Romans, verses 18 to 32 of chapter 1. It challenges massive assumptions all around us, questions that we might have about God.

Does God ever get angry? What does that mean, that God would be angry? Is God really there?

Can we tell that God is there from creation? What's God's view of sex, of homosexual practice?

Does everyone go to heaven? So with so many big issues floating around, we're going to have two bites at the chapter. Next week we're going to continue in the same section.

[ 5 : 02 ] We're looking at chapter 1, verses 18 to 32 in two weeks. So that we can give a bit more time to such a challenging word. And we started Romans last week. We're going to do it as a series here.

It's a letter written by an early Christian Paul, early Christian leader, to a church in Rome, which was the center of the Roman Empire, of course. And he's writing to straighten out their understanding of the gospel, to protect them from fake news going around the church at the time.

False gospels, alternative gospels. He wants to protect them, partly for their good and also so that they will support Paul on his mission to take the gospel to the nations.

So we heard in the opening verses last week that the central message about Christianity, the gospel, is good news about Jesus, about who Jesus is and what he did. That's what the gospel is. Good news about who Jesus is and what Jesus did. And then in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 1, Paul set out this headline that he's going to explain in the coming chapters.

[ 6 : 05 ] And he said in his headline, he's not ashamed of the gospel. And he's not ashamed of it because it's God's power to save everyone who believes it. But why?

Why is the gospel good news? Why? What makes it good? Why would God put his power into this message? And why would we need that power to be saved?

What do we need to be saved from? On Friday, my wife Kathy went out with a group of friends that we've got to know in Glasgow. And I was babysitting. But she said about the time that she had with these friends of ours that the guys talked happily about their incredible holidays.

They talked about their fulfilling jobs. They talked about restaurants and food. They talked about music and gigs. Why on earth would the gospel be news that they need to hear when their lives seem so sorted?

Well, the reality is very sobering. Paul begins by telling us that God is angry. If you just have a look at verse 18. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people.

[ 7 : 21 ] Now, when we think about anger, we think about someone flying off the handle. Like the Ryanair passenger in the news this week with his racist tirade against someone sitting next to him. This kind of explosive loss of self-control.

But God's anger is not like that. We have to separate it from that picture we might have of road rage and things like that. God's anger is his settled, controlled hostility against all that is evil.

It's good news, God's anger. In fact, when people see evil things in our world, we often ask, how can God be good if things like that are going to go on, apparently unpunished in our world?

We live in a world where a couple of years ago, Anthony Walker, an 18-year-old, was brutally murdered by an ice axe in the back of his head for no other reason than that he was black.

Where the synagogue in America, just overnight, we hear someone went in and shot people dead for being Jewish. Police officers, Nicola and Fiona in Manchester, called out to a burglary not so long ago, bravely arrived on the scene to help because of the 999 call, and they were shot dead for being police officers.

[ 8 : 40 ] A man visits his country's consulate in Turkey, gets brutally murdered. Children are being taken to camps in China for correction, taken away from their parents.

If we haven't got room in our view of God for him to be angry, what kind of God are we left with?

Who could just see what's going on in our world and shrug his shoulders?

We don't shrug our shoulders, and he cares more passionately than us. So it's good news to know that because of God's good character, he is hostile to evil. He stands against it.

But who is God angry with? Why is he angry? And how is he making it known that he is angry?

That's what Paul explains to us here. And our first point is this. God's invisible qualities can be seen from creation.

There's an outline inside the notice sheet. You'll see that our points are there. I'm literally just telling you what the chapter says. I want you to be able to think as you leave. I don't know what we pay Martin for. He just said exactly what the Bible says.

[ 9 : 41 ] It's straight from God's word. So have a look with me at verse 20. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, and he tells us what they are, his eternal power and divine nature, those qualities have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.

So through modern science, we've made such exciting progress in understanding some of the deep mysteries of how our universe has progressed over the ages and how our world has developed.

But what we don't know is, why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there a universe that apparently obeys these laws of physics and laws of chemistry and so on?

Now Romans 1 tells us that the very fact there is a universe at all and that we're around and able to observe it speaks to us about God, the creator, his divine nature, his eternal power.

But the objection comes, I don't think so. I look at the universe and I look at life and I look at human life and I don't think there was a creator, someone says.

[10:49] So why is that? Well, the arguments that there is a creator from looking at the universe are very compelling. That the conditions, there's the fine-tuning argument that the conditions that we need to have a sustained universe that could support stars and planets and life, the universe seems to be unbelievably finely tuned for that to happen.

Even before you've got life to form, which is an incredibly improbable thing, just for stars and planets to be possible, there are 15 numbers that all have to be exactly what they are in our universe.

numbers like the size of the strong nuclear force and the weak nuclear force, the speed at which the universe first expanded in its very young stage, the amount of gravity that we've got.

There are these constants in our universe and those 15 different numbers, they have to be exactly what they are to the tune of one part in a million. If any of them was a millionth out or more, it would be game over for our universe.

So to picture how unlikely that is without there being someone to guide it, just imagine 15 massive roulette wheels in the sky, enormous roulette wheels, and each one represents one of the numbers that we need for our universe.

[12:13] And each roulette wheel has a million numbers on it. And you spin the first one for gravity, for the force of gravity. It's going to determine the force of gravity. And the ball bounces past all the other million numbers and it lands on exactly the right one.

It's extraordinary. You can barely believe your eyes. So you spin the next one and the second wheel for the size of the strong nuclear constant. Again, the ball passes hundreds of thousands of wrong numbers and it lands on exactly the right one.

Imagine you do that 14 times and every single time you get the right number. And then you spin wheel number 15 and the ball skips around and it lands on the number just next to the correct one out of a million numbers.

And the whole universe collapses. It just implodes into non-existence. That's what physicists tell us. That's just to get stars and planets.

We haven't even got life yet. And when you hear things like that from scientists at the frontier of what we can know, we need to ask, well, what fits the evidence better? That there was a big bang caused and guided by nobody that just happened to come from nothing and then to win an intergalactic roulette with an unimaginably extraordinary stroke of luck?

[13:31] Are we to believe that? It's so unlikely that, it's so improbable that that's what's led to the multiverse theory. People saying, well, that couldn't have happened. So if we're not going to accept God, let's speculate there must be an infinite number of universes out there beyond ours.

It's just speculation. Or is it more reasonable to believe that there is a personal creator God who made it happen, who guided it along? So that's the fine-tuning argument for the existence of God. It doesn't prove it in a scientific way, but what fits better with the evidence? There's the moral argument for the existence of God looking around us, that if you don't accept God, you have to believe that there's no real right and wrong, that human beings are no more valuable or significant or important than trees or even stones, that human rights are just a myth.

So that when we contend against human rights abuses in other cultures, we are just cultural imperialists. We're just imposing our own entirely subjective moral values on other people.

The strong imposing our views on the less strong, like a bully in the global playground. And the only reason we think our views are right are because of blind physical forces determined to survive.

[14:51] The Nazi death camps were like a solar eclipse. It's all just matter in motion. Or is it more reasonable to believe that there is a personal creator God and our strong sense that there is right and wrong and good and evil and lives matter is explained that we were made in God's image.

So we look at what God has made, we look at ourselves, we look at the universe, and Paul is saying that we should all know deep down that the God of the Bible is there. So if those arguments and others like them are so compelling, why do so many people not believe in God?

Why do they say, well, I hear that, but I don't agree? Why do good arguments often fail? We see that, don't we, as we talk to friends about believing in God, that good arguments often fail. Well, the answer comes from our second point from the passage, that God's revelation is being suppressed. God's revelation is being suppressed. If you have a look with me at verse 18, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

So creation all around us is shouting out, there is a God, he is good, he is powerful, he is divine, and we close our ears to it. We don't listen.

[16:13] That word suppress is a continuous word. Back in May, we went as a family on a camping trip up to the Trossacks, so we packed our bags of clothes and camping stoves and food and cutlery and crockery.

We packed our tent and awning and ground sheet and roll mats and sleeping bags, our midgy nets, our midgy spray, our torches and lanterns, a table, chairs, a cool box.

And when it came to closing the boot, it was a bit of a challenge. And I had to, you know the feeling, the boot is pushing out all this stuff in it, and I had to push down on the boot.

I knew as I was driving up to the campsite that all that time, there's pressure inside the boot, pushing up on the boot, so that as soon as you open it again, it will fly open.

That's the same kind of idea of the truth about God, the revelation about God all around us. It's continually happening, and we are continually suppressing it as humanity.

[17:16] We don't want it to be there, so we keep it back down, we suppress it. Now, why do we do that? Well, verse 21 tells us, for although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God, nor gave thanks to Him.

We don't want to give thanks. We don't want to glorify our Creator. When you're a student, you have to be careful, don't you, about plagiarism, because it's a form of stealing. When you take what someone else has done, has created, and you pass it off as your own work.

And this is telling us that we're all guilty of a kind of cosmic plagiarism, that if we were willing to give thanks to God and glorify Him, we'd have to recognize that He's in charge, that He has the right to say what's right and wrong in our world and in our lives.

And we hate that. We hate that. And so instead, we stop giving thanks to Him, because we don't want Him to be in charge. If you don't think that you feel that particularly strongly, you might just ask yourself the question, who has the right to tell me how to live?

Who has the right to dictate to me what is right and wrong for my life? The answer that we want to tell ourselves is nobody. No one has that right to tell me how to live.

[18:36] We even indoctrinate our kids with it. I shared this a month or two ago here, that when Kathy and I were looking around a school for our children, one of the schools we looked around, there was a poster on the wall for all the pupils to read, and it was a poem.

And it said this, for the children to learn from, There is a voice inside of you that whispers all day long, I feel that this is right for me. I know that this is wrong. No teacher, preacher, parent, friend, or wise man can decide what's right for you.

Just listen to the voice that speaks inside. It's extraordinary. That's the spirit of our age. Don't tell anybody how to live their life.

They can decide from their own feelings what's right and wrong. Now, for that to be true, I mean, none of us really believes that. We say it because we want it to be true for us. None of us believes that about other people.

But for that to be true, we have to suppress the truth about God. It's a commitment in our hearts, and once we make it, this is really important, once you make that commitment in your heart, you can't think straight about God anymore.

[19:43] It clouds your mind. Look at verse 21. He says, sorry, verse 22. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.

End of verse 21. Their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened. And I wonder, when we read that, does that explain to us why we find God's word so confronting in Romans chapter 1?

When we're suppressing the truth in our unrighteousness, it clouds our thinking, so we can't think straight anymore. And that's why I call this sermon, our title today is, a problem so big we can't even see it.

Claiming to be wise, we've become fools. So how does God react to that truth suppression going on across the human race? Well, that's our third point.

It's not quite following the notice sheet now, but the third point, God has handed us over to depravity. Now, if you just look down at verses 24 to 32, we didn't have it read, but you can see the same phrase gets repeated three times.

[ 20 : 50 ] Look at verse 24. It says, therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity.

Then you look down at verse 26. Because of this, and there it is again, God gave them over to shameful lusts. And then in verse 28, furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind so that they do what ought not to be done.

God gives us over. God takes off the restraints, if you like. Our hearts are turned away from Him and His good design for our lives. So when we reject Him, He leaves us to run off after our own desires.

What does that look like? Well, in verses 24 to 27, what Paul focuses on is sexual impurity, a turning away by our society from God's design for sex, that it's the glue that binds together one man and one woman in marriage.

And we'll come back and think more about that next week. Then in verse 29, he gives us four general descriptions of humanity given over by God.

[ 22 : 09 ] Verse 29, he says, they become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. General descriptions. Every kind.

Then further down in verse 31, he mentions four things that we don't have in a society like that.

Verse 31, no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

We're senseless, we're faithless, we're loveless, we're merciless. And in between those general words, he gives some specific kinds of behavior.

And the clear point that Paul's making in these verses is that the whole human race is in the same boat. So he speaks about murder, but he also mentions envy.

He mentions deceit. He talks about hating God. I don't think I really do hate God. But then he talks about boasting and disobeying your parents.

[ 23 : 09 ] He's just describing relational chaos, relational meltdown in society. It's not that every single person is guilty of every single thing from verses 24 to verse 32.

It's that these are some of the characteristics of a society that God hands over to run after its own desires. So you take a step back and you think, well, what do these kinds of behaviors reveal about mankind?

If you're a religious person, you might see a list like this and think, oh, these are things that make God angry. But that's not Paul's point in Romans chapter 1. You see that?

His point is not these things make God angry. His point is, when you see things like this going on in a society, here is evidence that God has already been angry with humanity for suppressing the truth about him.

And to reveal his righteous anger, he has handed us over to our sinful desires. So what are we looking for as the marks that reveal God is angry with us for rejecting him?

[ 24 : 23 ] Well, what do we see when we look around us today? Looking at the list here, when we see a society where people disobey their parents, where the rule about sex is you can do whatever you want with your body as long as you consent, where medical technology and research is pushed forward without respecting the sanctity of all human life, including the unborn, where people think it's not even wrong to be greedy or envious because we might say that we need those kind of drivers for the market economy to work so that we create wealth.

We want to applaud wealth creation. Where people don't think it's important to keep your promises, the promises that we might make in business, the promises we make when we get married, the promises that politicians make in their manifestos, the commitments we make to each other to meet up at particular times in particular places, where there are people in need in society who are not shown mercy so that they struggle on without help and support and life's really difficult for them. Well, folks, that's the kind of thing being described in Romans 1. Doesn't that describe our society today? And if we see some of those traits in our society, it reveals something very sobering about Scotland that we can see evidence all around us that God is angry with our culture for rejecting Him

and He has given us over to our desires to reveal His wrath.

Let me just mention a few implications of that. First of all, what this means is that our biggest problem is the wrath of God. Not emptiness deep inside, not discontentedness, not even ocean plastic or diesel cars or artificial intelligence or Brexit.

Some of these are significant problems. problems. But by far, our biggest problem is that God is angry with us. It's the biggest problem that your colleagues have, your friends have, the people you see in the gym, in the swimming club, the clients you have at work, whatever service you provide for them, the biggest problem the people of Glasgow have.

[ 26 : 51 ] Our biggest problem is not just that sin wrecks our relationships. No, our biggest problem is that God is angry. because we've rejected him. A second implication, God's word explains God's world.

It's very controversial today to say what I'm saying, to talk about sin, to say that God could possibly be angry with us, and yet, when things go wrong in our society, our society's picture of God as, if he is there, he's a great father Christmas in the sky, who approves of all that we do, it's completely inadequate, isn't it, to explain our world.

So when things go wrong, bishops and archbishops get reeled onto the media and get asked, how can God be good and allow these things to happen? Well, God tells us here in Romans 1 the truth that explains some of that, not all of it, but some of it at least.

What if God really is good, perfectly good, and the depravity that we see him allowing in our world is a signpost from him to us that something has gone seriously wrong in our relationship with him and that we have got to put it right.

We've got to get it right. So God's word here, we might find it confronting, but it makes sense of our world. Third implication, this is everyone's problem.

[ 28 : 19 ] The clear message in Romans 1, we don't pick out bits of Romans 1 and say, well, I know people who do that and at least I don't do that. No, none of us is in a different category to anybody else.

Nobody can say, I'm righteous here and nobody can plead ignorance. If the revelation of God is all around us, none of us is ignorant of it and none of us can think, at least I'm not as bad as that person or at least I haven't done that.

We're all truth suppressors in our unrighteousness and under God's wrath. And last implication for this morning, fourthly, the gospel is very precious.

The worst thing you could take from Romans 1 and being here this morning is some kind of idea that you need to go away and try harder yourself to please God. That's not Paul's aim here.

No, instead, this passage is like the black cloth so that the saving news of Jesus will shine like a diamond on top of it. We've heard that in our world today God's wrath is being revealed.

[ 29 : 28 ] But Paul began his section by saying something else is being revealed as well. In verse 17 he said this, for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.

This is God's power to save everyone who believes it no matter who they are and what they have done. That he offers us through Jesus that he can hand us a righteousness that we never earned ourselves and we clothe ourselves in it so that instead of being under his wrath we stand under his approval and instead of experiencing his frown we experience his smile.

It's an offer that all of us need. So as we come to the Lord's Supper this morning let's do that with real thankfulness in our hearts that Jesus made a new covenant through his blood for the forgiveness of all of our sins.

Let's pray together. We'll have a moment of quiet just to reflect on God's word to us personally. Heavenly Father we see this description of a society under your wrath and we see the marks of our generation here in Scotland today.

[ 31 : 16 ] We're sorry that our hearts are bent against living for your glory and giving thanks to you. We thank you that your word warns us not to leave us condemned but rather to drive us on our knees to the solution that you have provided.

we pray that you will have mercy on our city that you'll have mercy on Scotland that by your spirit's power you will awaken in us and all around us a conviction that we are indeed under your wrath so that many will believe the gospel and be saved and forgiven.

We ask in Jesus name Amen. we're going to sing again in response to God's word we're going to sing again in response to God's word