The Wrath and Righteousness of God
Romans 1:16-32

We're looking at the passage that, in today's Western culture, is probably *the* most controversial one in the whole Bible. Because think of some of the slogans that mark our time: Love is love. My body, my choice. Keep *your* laws off *my* body. Freedom to love, freedom to choose. And sexual freedom is considered a basic human right. And I should be able to have sex with whoever I want, providing they're a consenting adult. But then, here comes Paul saying, no, there are limits to sexual freedom.

And think of the context this passage is set in. If you were here last week you'll know that Paul starts this letter by talking of the gospel - the good news - of God. But in what world is putting limits on our freedom, and especially our sexual freedom, good news? Not in today's world.

And to be clear, freedom is a great good. And being free to choose your own sexual partner is a great good. But is freedom without limits a great good? And what if being free to do whatever you want, with whoever you want, is not so much a blessing, but the opposite?

Well, last week, in the introduction, Paul majored on the gospel of God - here he begins to go deeper, to the power of God, and the righteousness of God, and the wrath of God. Which is what we're going to look at this morning.

The Power of God
Imagine that you could collect all the energy of the universe and condense it and concentrate it, until you are holding it in your hand. That would be some power you're holding, wouldn't it. But that's exactly what Paul does with the gospel in v16-17. Because in the chapters that follow he's going to let all that energy, all the cosmic and individual implications of the gospel out. But before he does he compresses it down.

Verse 16, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is *the power of God.'*

Now if I handed you a solar panel, or a can of diesel, or gave you the key to a hydroelectric plant and said, 'there's power for you'. Wouldn't you be justified in asking, 'power for what?'

And the gospel is no different. Verse 16 again, '*for salvation* to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.' So the proclamation of all that Christ has done for us is the power of God for saving people - no matter who you are - Jew or Gentile. No matter how you currently define yourself or, given the context, what your sexual orientation is. This is God's power for all.

Except it's not. Because your gadget won't charge unless you plug it into the socket, will it? And the power of the gospel is only going to be released in someone's life, Paul says, if they believe it, and trust it. But for everyone who *does* believe it, the power starts flowing.

Great - but again, salvation from what? And isn't it just a tad suspicious to begin by saying 'I am not ashamed of it'? Because doesn't that imply there might just be something to be ashamed of?

Well, in Paul's day there was. Because crucifixion was utterly shameful. So shameful you couldn't crucify a citizen - only scum and slaves. But here is Paul proclaiming that Christ was crucified to save you. And in an empire built on power and glory, where's the power or glory in that? What's *not* shameful about that?

But also, if the gospel tells us Christ had to die *the most shameful* of deaths to save us - what does that say about us? Because it tells the moral person - however good you think you are, or try to be, it's not enough: you cannot save yourself. While at the same time it tells the person who couldn't care less about morality — your situation is so bad Christ had to die for you. And isn't that ever so slightly offensive to both?

And fast forward to today, and throw in a sexual ethic that has people shouting 'Bigot!' and Paul's statement, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel' sounds all the starker doesn't it?

But why was he not ashamed of it? Because of what it's saving us from.

You see, read the press or watch the news, and there's generally some new medical treatment making the headlines, isn't there? Why? Because of the difference this thing will make to the number of people affected by, or the severity of the disease, or both.

And the gospel is unashamedly good news, Paul says, because it's God's power to save you from the trouble that all of us - Jew and gentile, deeply religious and irreligious, rule-keeper and rule-breaker, are in.

The Wrath of God

Verse 18: 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.' And commentators argue that those two words, ungodliness and unrighteousness, describe the vertical and horizontal nature of sin. That vertically, in our relationship with God, to be godly is to live in right relationship with him, while *un*godliness is to turn our backs on him and live our lives without reference to him.

And horizontally, in our relationships with others, to live righteously is to live justly, and lovingly with others, while *un*righteousness is to live for ourselves, whatever that means for others.

And it's that ungodliness and unrighteousness, Paul says, that's the trouble we're all in, because God's not neutral to it. He sees vertical and horizontal sin and he doesn't just let it pass. He's hostile to it. He sees the fall-out - in injustice and broken lives - and he is implacably opposed to it. In Paul's words, his wrath, his anger, is revealed against it.

But what if you don't like the idea of a God who's angry at sin? What if you'd prefer him to be more accommodating? Well, would you *really* want a God who was *not* righteously angry at sin? Who did not judge it?

Because I doubt any of us would be happy with the idea that everyone, no matter the crime, just got away with it. We all want justice to be done, don't we? So if there is a God, don't we also want *him* to be just?

So the real problem is we're conflicted. It's not that we *don't* want a God who judges, it's that we don't want him to judge *me*.

But it's worse, Paul says. Because God's wrath is revealed, v18 again, against those 'who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.' So it's not just that 'ok, theoretically, if there was a God I'd want him to be just', it's that deep down we all *know* there *is* a God.

Verses 19-20: ‘For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things have been made.’

In other words, as we look at creation, we know: ‘someone must have made this’ but then we suppress that thought, and don’t go there. As we look at the immensity of the universe we think of the even greater power it must have taken to make it - but we shut down that thought. And when we realise that we’re also a part of this vast universe, so we also have a maker, and we owe him our thanks. But we don’t go there, we suppress that.

Now maybe you think ‘that’s baloney’. Except, did you see the article that appeared on the BBC website this week, titled, ‘Star Bathing - the next big thing in travel’? Because it was anything but a Christian article. In fact, read it and it’s hard not to have the impression that the writer was trying very hard *not* to mention God.

Here’s how it begins, ‘From the Yorkshire Moors in England to the South African wilderness, star bathing is emerging as a transformative wellness trend – offering awe, calm and a cosmic reset.’ And the writer describes how she booked herself onto a retreat that included sitting in an empty bathtub, in the middle of the night, on the Yorkshire moors. And she says, ‘I am trying to suspend the part of me that is deeply sceptical *because I desperately want an escape from the anxiety that has plagued the past three years of my life.*’

So the writer’s there because she knows she’s not right - that she desperately wants an escape from anxiety. And it’s why such wellness retreats exist, isn’t it? That recognition that we’re not at peace with ourselves or others. And Paul would say, exactly, it’s a symptom of the breakdown we all feel.

But then she says, ‘Suddenly I feel something shift. I realise that I am not just looking up at the universe, I am part of the universe. It is impossible not to feel awed by the vastness and beauty of the night sky above me.’ And the article describes how regularly experiencing awe is ‘deeply beneficial for our mental wellbeing.’ That, 'As we look up at the night sky and become aware of our place within it, that sense of wonder and awe can really shift our perspective around who and what we are.’ In other words, we know that the answer to our trouble is outside of us, in something infinitely greater and more beautiful than us, in something that inspires *awe*.

‘Sure’ you might say - ‘but they’re talking about stars, not God.’ Agreed. Except listen to what the writer says next: ‘It's a freezing night, but no one wants to go inside. *It feels like a gift* – this clear, beautiful night.’ A gift for which she seems genuinely thankful. And again Paul would say, absolutely, all this beauty, and awe, and wonder, feels like a gift, because it is a gift.

But a gift requires a giver. But do we want to go there, or suppress it?

But then the writer tells of an interview she conducted with someone in South Africa who organises similar events and who reported: "Another guest, a grieving mother, found solace in our wilderness night ventures and naked-eye stargazing, saying: *'It felt like the universe was mourning with me.”*’

But can a soul-less, meaningless universe mourn with you? So what is that grieving mother sensing, deep down? That the universe is not meaningless; and that the God who made the universe, and collects all our tears in his bottle, does mourn with her.

And the article ends with an astrophysicist saying, "Even if you can only see one star – that light's been travelling across the universe for hundreds and hundreds of years to hit your eyeball at that precise moment. *Against all the odds, you're seeing that ray of light. That means something."* Against all the odds… that means something.

But if you're just a random product of chance and odds, nothing has meaning. But deep down he knows, and you know, that your life, which *is* against all the odds, does have meaning. Exactly, Paul says, but what do you do with that? Do you follow through, with all the implications of a God on whom we depend, and who gives meaning to beauty and wonder and awe, or do we suppress it?

But if we do suppress is it, we end up living incoherent lives: v21, 'They became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.' We say 'life has meaning', but deny the one thing - God - that can give life meaning. We say 'its wrong to say something is right or wrong' without realising that statement itself is saying something is right or wrong. We say 'there are fundamental, universal human rights' - but how can there be unless there is a universal law of rights from a universal lawgiver? We say 'every life has innate value and worth' - but if nature is red in tooth and claw, why can't the strong eat the weak?

But the problem goes deeper, Paul says, because in turning away from God it's not like we can adopt a spiritual version of Swiss neutrality - because we all end up worshipping something. Because you're made to worship. Verses 22-23, 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.' Or, as Paul puts it in v25, we worship created things, not the Creator.

And you could make statues to those things - like the Romans did. But statue or no statue, it still becomes an object of worship or trust doesn't it? Whether it's money, success, sex, pleasure, travel, or power. Because whatever you look to to get you through the hard times, or that if you have it tells you you're a good person, you've made it, or if it's taken from you your world crumbles; the thing you're sacrificing for, because you've got to have it, that's your god.

And it's that ungodliness and the unrighteousness that flows from it, that, v18, 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against.' But did you notice the present tense? 'Is', not 'will be' revealed. In other words, Paul is saying, you can see evidence of God's wrath and judgment against our worshipping of idols *now, at the present time.*

Except, when you think of God's anger or judgment, what images come into mind? Fire and brimstone? Thunder and lightening? Hell and pitchforks?

What we don't tend to think of is people getting what they want. Because we think getting what we want, when we want it, is the way to life. But what if it's the opposite?

Look at v24, 'Therefore God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves.' And that word *lust* is the word *epithumia.* Not just *desire*, but

over-desire. Not just bad things we want, but good things we want just that bit too much. And when we want those things more than God, one form of judgment is for God to say, 'ok, you can have it'.

And here, Paul's talking about all forms of sex outside of marriage. 'You want total sexual freedom, well, you can have it, and let's see how it goes.'

And doesn't the heart break, or the angst around relationships, or sexual performance, or even the declining rates of people having sex, or getting married, to say nothing of the abortion rate tell you, all is not right? That maybe total freedom is not such a great good after all? As the saying goes, 'Be careful what you wish for' be careful what you overly long for.

But then he moves to same-sex sex, to sex contrary to nature. Because if nature teaches us something about God it also teaches us something about ourselves, and who we should, and should not, be having sex with. Verses 26-27: 'For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.'

So heterosexual sex outside of marriage is idolatry, because it's saying 'I can find fullness of life apart from God and his ways', but so too are all forms of same-sex sex. And today, the cultural acceptance of homosexual acts is seen as something to be applauded. It's not, Paul says. That widespread acceptance is evidence of God giving us over to our desires.

But if you're sat there thinking, 'yeh it's those people who sleep around, or those same-sex attracted people, they're the problem', there's a third giving-them-over. Verse 28, 'And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.' And he follows that up, in v29-30, with a list of attitudes and behaviours which the wrath of God is revealed against, just as much as against sexual sin: covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, being insolent, haughty, boastful, or disobedient to parents.

And could any of us say, we have never envied, or coveted, or gossiped, or been proud, or boasted, or disobeyed our parents? So by the end of the passage, the charge of ungodliness and unrighteousness comes closer and closer to home, until we realise we're all in trouble, we're all in need of saving, because we all stand under the wrath of God.

Which is what makes the gospel of God such good news.

The Righteousness of God

Go back to v16-17: 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes… *for in it* the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.'

Recently, I was asked by another church to write a letter of recommendation for someone who used to be in Westlake, but has moved away and wants to join their church. What do you think that church wants to know? Did they leave on good terms - are they in right standing with you?

Or think of your bank. They could look at your accounts, at your credit and debts and go - all's good. She's in right standing with the bank. There's nothing on your record against you.

But before God, in our record of credit and debt toward him, or others, in our relationship with him - none of us are in right standing, Paul's said. None of us are *righteous*.

Which is why *the gospel* of God is *the power* of God for salvation from *the wrath of God* - because in it *the righteousness* of God is revealed.

Because if here Paul documents how humanity has exchanged God for created things, at the cross another, far greater exchange happens. Because there, Christ took upon himself all our ungodliness, and unrighteoussness. And the wrath of God that was ours to bear, fell on him. In the words of the hymn, in our place condemned he stood, and sealed our pardon with his blood.

But the pardon, the forgiveness, is just one half of the exchange: yes, your slate is wiped clean, your debts are rubbed out, but the gospel says there's more. Because Jesus doesn't simply take our sin - he gives us his righteousness. As Paul says elsewhere, God 'made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become *the righteousness of God*.' (2 Cor 5:21).

So if you read this chapter and you realise all the ways sin has slimed you, or all the ways you are not right. Jesus does not leave you there. At the cross, he wipes out all the debt, washes you of all the grime, and then says, come, take all my credit, be covered by all my righteousness.

And that righteousness, Paul says, is 'from faith for faith.' From top to bottom and from first to last, it's by trusting Christ and not yourself. And it begins with us just trusting him and it continues with ever deepening faith and relationship with him

And quoting the prophet Habbakuk, Paul says that faith becomes a way of life: v17, 'For the righteous shall live by faith'. Because we all live by faith in something, don't we? The atheist bets his life on something he cannot prove, that there is no God. And the agnostic believes there's not enough evidence to commit. We all live by faith in something. So the Christian, the one who understands the power of the gospel, lives by faith in the fact that he or she has been counted righteous in Christ, so you don't have to live your life by fear, thinking God's going to cast you off for your bad performance.

And you don't live by religious ritual, or zeal, thinking you have to do all this to stay in God's good books. No, you *live* by faith, trusting all that Jesus has done for you. And finding rest for your restless heart in him.

And you don't live your life thinking real life is found in finding a mate, or having lots of sex, or travelling the world, or advancing your career. No, fullness of life is found in Christ - in allowing him to shape all of life - because the righteous *live* all of life by faith.

So the Christian sexual ethic may be profoundly counter-cultural. It always has been. But so is the gospel. Because in it the power of God and the righteousness of God are revealed. So don't be ashamed of it. Instead, live this week in the good of it.