

“The Book of Romans: A Shared Reality”

Let's get right into it this morning. We're in week two of our series on the book of Romans. If you have your Bibles with you, in front of you, (a Bible app), open to chapter one.

If you weren't here last week, I'd encourage you to go online and listen. We spent our time on the first seventeen verses of that opening chapter, where Paul is introducing himself to a group of believers in Rome he had never met. He's telling them about himself (about who he is), as well as about the gospel and what it is.

Because he'd never met them (or been to Rome), his letter (to them) is the most straightforward presentation of what we teach and believe as you'll find in the New Testament. He wants them to know what matters to us as followers of Jesus, what's essential to our faith. And so, he gives them (gives us) a systematic presentation of the gospel. He presents our theology, what we believe about God and what he is doing (and has done), in a very orderly and systematic manner.

Last week, we spent a majority of our time on the major theme of his letter. In verses 16 & 17 (of chapter one), Paul says he is “not ashamed of the gospel, (he's not embarrassed by it) because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. For in it, (in the gospel), a righteousness from God is revealed (it is made known, it is given to us) in the person and work of Jesus through our faith in him.”

Today, we move into a section where the focus shifts (as Paul puts it) from the “revelation of God's righteousness” through our faith (verse 17), to what is being “revealed by God (verse 18) through his wrath.” In this section, Paul is refocusing the discussion. He's moving the conversation away from what God has done to save us in Jesus, to what God is doing to reveal his wrath against the sin (in the world and in our lives) that caused his Son to go to the cross and die.

In doing this, he's systematically presenting, giving to us, a picture of how God's love for us (as our Creator) and God's hatred of our sin (as his creatures) come together and are (both necessary) for our salvation. And the way in which this happens, from both directions, his love and his wrath, is in the person and work of Christ.

Let me give you an outline of Paul's argument in this section, and then we'll (come back) and say more about some of the specifics.
(You'll see it on the front wall.)

In chapter one, verse 18, through chapter two, verse 16, Paul is talking about the condition of the Gentile world; the human condition of those (who are not Jews) and who are living apart from the gospel, apart from God's saving work in Christ. He's making the case (in these verses) that the Gentile world, no matter who they are, (who we are) is guilty in the sight of God. No excuses; we're all guilty, every one of us.

Then, in chapter two, verse 17, through chapter three, verse 8, Paul deals with the human condition of those who are Jews, who are among the ones chosen by God (in the Old Testament) to be the nation through which he would send his Son Jesus. In this section, he's arguing that the Jews, the ones who should have known better, who should have understood (how this all works) and had faith, are also guilty. Even in knowing (and having received) God's law (he says), they haven't followed it and (therefore) deserve his judgment.

In chapter three, verses 9-18, we find a summary about the entire world. Paul quotes several passages (in this section) from the Old Testament that make it clear that “there is no one righteous; not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.” (Paul could not be more clear in what he is saying.)

And then, at the close of this section, (verses 19 & 20), in case there is still any question on where this all leads, he wraps it up by saying, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law; so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in (God's) sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

This entire section, chapter one, verse 18, through chapter three, verse 20, is dealing with the human condition apart from Jesus. It's a picture of where things are at and where this is all heading apart from Christ.

And it's not a pretty picture. It's not a hopeful picture of our human condition and where it all leads. "There is no one righteous (in God's sight); not even one."

That's the (big picture) Paul gives, an outline of what he's saying. Let's talk about some of the specifics. What's going on in Paul's argument? How does he come to the conclusion he does? And what is it in our theology (our understanding of God) that can lead us to the point of saying that everyone in the world is in need of Christ?

We don't have time to go into all of it, but (in this section) Paul is presenting two fundamental reasons why all of us are guilty, why none of us can give an excuse for what we have done. The first is in chapter one, verses 19-20, where Paul is arguing that (in creation), in the world itself, it is obvious, it is clear, it is apparent to anyone who is honest that there must be a God. There must be a God.

Look at what he says, and we'll start in verse 18. (He says), "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, (verse 19), since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. (Now listen.) 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."

In other words, (Paul says), the world itself, is reason enough for people to know. The world as we see it (and as it is), is evidence enough that there must be a God. How could this world have come into being on its own? (Paul says it couldn't have and it's obvious.) How could we be surrounded by what we are, if for no other reason than by chance? Paul says there's not a chance in the world that we're here in this world by chance.

I find it interesting, in this age of such advanced technology, that we still have those who will argue that our world has just fallen into place. We've evolved, we've progressed, we've somehow moved forward (over billions of years) to get to where we are today. And if not that, then some kind of explosion or some other random event has caused it all to happen...independent of a God.

I find it interesting because, at the same time...I don't know how many of you saw it, but at an event in Cupertino (this past week), Apple announced the launching of two new iPhones, the XS and XR. I continue to be amazed at the advances being made, at what some of the best minds (and technology) our world has to offer can put into one small device. It's incredible.

What's even more incredible is that there is even greater capacity and knowledge and capability in the human mind. (Just think about it.) What's inside of all of us (in our heads) far exceeds what our most advanced technology can even begin to produce.

Now, Paul had no idea about the iPhone. The world we live in today (in its technology) is light years ahead of what Paul and his contemporaries knew. But his argument still stands.

No one would argue that the latest iPhone could ever have come into being on its own; that it would have evolved, that it would have taken shape, that it would ended up where it is (over time) by some random event. No one would argue that it could happen. You'd be a fool to think that it could or it would. There's no way.

And yet, with all the evidence around us, the detail and complexity of our world, and the vastness and enormity of what see? Look in a microscope and you see the detail. Look in a telescope and you see the design. Paul says people are without excuse in failing to acknowledge and believe that there must be a God. It is plain to them (he says) because God has made it plain to them.

And yet, (he says) they have failed to acknowledge his existence. They have failed to accept that they are not in control. Verse 21, "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 mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."

Paul's world was filled with false gods, idols all around and throughout. And it hasn't changed. If anything, in our knowledge and awareness and expertise, it's only become worse. We're surrounded by evidence of God's existence, and yet (as Paul puts it) we continue to "suppress the truth."

The second argument he presents is in chapter 2, beginning in verse 12, and it relates to the awareness we have of God through our conscience. (Look at what he says), and he's arguing for the guilt of the Jews, of those who have received God's law, and how it relates even to those who have not.

He says, “All who sin apart from the law (God’s commands) will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. Indeed, when Gentiles who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law (and now listen) since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bear witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”

Now, there’s a lot going on in those few short verses, but it’s not hard to follow. Paul is saying that even if we didn’t know the law, we’d never read (or heard) the commandments, we’d still know that there’s a right and a wrong way to live. God has ordered his creation in such a way, has created (and wired us) in such a way that even before we knew something was wrong, we inherently knew that it was wrong.

Every parent has seen it in their children. You walk in and they’re doing something and (all of a sudden) it gets silent. You never talked about it (being wrong), but they knew (before they did it) that it was...and that’s why they stopped.

You don’t have to go to church to know that it’s wrong to steal. You don’t have to read your Bible to know that it’s not right to kill or to cheat or to be less than honest in what you do. It’s a built-in part of God’s created order, wired into each of us, whether we are believers (and followers of Jesus) or not. (No one has to tell you.) We all know it. We all understand what is right. And yet, we have all failed to do it. Even though we know it, we still don’t do it...and that’s the point.

Here’s the point: Jews, Greeks, believers, non-believers, first century, 21st century, Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, or whatever, it’s all the same. “There is none righteous, not one...Every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in (God’s) sight through the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

And so, where does that leave us, apart from one step (further along) it putting together this systematic theological puzzle Paul is giving us? Let me close with a few brief thoughts.

Here’s the first: In this section dealing with our human condition, Paul is open and upfront about what we face, because he knows (full well) that a superficial diagnosis of the problem leads to a false and (less than helpful) remedy and cure.

There was a reason my Mom used to rub our knees with a washcloth and soap when we fell on the playground. If she didn’t clean out the gravel and the dirt, it would never heal. (A band-aid alone wouldn’t do it.) It would only become infected and get worse. In order for healing to take place, she had to (first) be honest about the problem and go after it.

It’s the same thing with sin. If we think it’s no big deal, then it’ll never get better and heal; we’ll never fix (or address) the real problem we face if we keep putting band-aids on it. Only in accurately diagnosing (what’s going on), will the remedy (or solution) offered actually work.

Let me give you a second: In all this talk about “the wrath of God,” Paul is not arguing for a God who loves to judge. What he is arguing for is a God who judges because he loves.

Look at the progression of what happens in the opening verses of his argument. (And this is just a sampling.) After all that God has done, after all he has given and revealed and tried...In chapter one, verse 21, (it says), “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...” (And so, what did God do?)

Verse 24: “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity...”

Verse 26: “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts...”

Verse 28: “Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind...”

Do you see the pattern? Do you see how God works? (It’s your life. You have free will.) If you want to live his way and follow what he says and put your faith and your trust in what he has done, then it’s all good and it’ll all (in Jesus) come together and work. (It will.)

But if you don’t and you won’t and you keep wanting to have it your own way, in spite of how he has revealed himself to you through your conscience and (in creation), then he will “give you over” to what you want and let you (find out for yourself) that it does not work.

And yet, (at the same time), and here’s the good news, even as he does, he never stops showing his love, and revealing his desire, even to those who sin.

Chapter two, (verse three), Paul says, "...do you think (in your sinfulness) you will escape God's judgement? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"

Do you see what's happening? Do you see how God chooses to work? His love and his wrath, they're both working toward the same goal. His judgment and his grace, they're both coming together to lead us to faith.

Sounds a lot like what Jesus was describing (when he said) that "God sends the rain on the just and the unjust."

Sounds a lot like what Paul is saying when he unapologetically states that "I am not ashamed of the gospel, of what God has done (and is doing), and has accomplished for all people in Christ."

My friends, don't miss it. God warns us with his wrath and he woos us with his kindness. And he does it (from both ends) to lead us to Jesus. Amen.