

It's a long time ago now, but I remember when I went into Lunns jewellers in Belfast to buy the engagement ring I was going to give to Alison. She had said she wanted a single diamond, and as I chose one, the assistant placed the ring on a black felt background in order that I could see the ring more clearly. And it actually worked. In order to see the perfection that was in the diamond, there needed to be something dark behind it. And in much the same way Paul in his letter to the Romans is creating a rather dark background to show the sheer contrast between what he has already talked about and what he's about to say now. You will remember 2 weeks ago we looked at what the Gospel was – it is the Good News. And in order for the Good News to stand out, Paul needs to describe what the Bad News is also. You need to understand our dark and depraved situation as a society today and throughout human history so as to understand how far God had to reach down to rescue us. That Good News is Christ and his victory on the cross. And as we looked last time, verse 16 & 17 tell us what saved us – that is the Gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. And now in verses 18-32 we begin to understand why we need to be saved.

Now as we delve into this very meaty piece of scripture, I'd like to remind you all of what we state at the end of our readings each week. The reader will say "This is the word of the Lord" and we respond "Thanks be to God". So we are not reading some opinion, we are not reading a letter from one person to another, we are declaring that these are God's words. They come from the one who created us, his is supreme over everything. And whilst they are hard to read and to listen to, I'd encourage you to not be offended by what I preach. As your pastor and teacher I must be obedient to what God's word says, I cannot deviate from it, and therefore if you find these words hard to hear then know that God gives us these words to help us understand his purity versus our impurity – the diamond and the black felt behind it.

And also as we have read these words we may think to ourselves, "well this isn't me he's talking about. Paul must be talking about other people" – for example we might very easily pick on verses 26-27 where he talks about unnatural sexual relations, and you can confirm that it doesn't relate to you. But as you read the entire passage, we all should recognise that we are in this list. Not one of us is excluded. Remember Romans 3:23 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'. In this reading our eyes might focus on sexual immorality, but we also see he talks about the gossipers, the haters of God, those that are disobedient to their parents. The list takes us from those that society might not grade as so sinful – those who boast (v30), through to those society considers as sheer evil – those who murder (v29). We are all in the list folks. And for many we will justify our actions by saying, "well I'm not that bad, at least I'm not like that guy down the street who did x,y, and z". The bible tells me that I am to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength and I will confess I haven't done that well. The bible says that I have to love my neighbour as myself, and I don't do that very well at times either. So as a result the bible tells me that I am a sinner, not just of what I did, but also of what I didn't do. Therefore I'm so glad folks that Heaven is not described as a place of perfect people, it is described as a place of forgiven people, because without the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ then the wrath of God as described here has every right to destroy me. Thank the Lord that Jesus has come to save.

So if we know what Jesus has done for us, then why do we have to have Paul here outline a list of things that makes us all feel rather uncomfortable? Well again it's because we have to know how bad off we are in order that we can appreciate how good the Good news is for us – remember the diamond and the dark background. If you don't know how ill you are, then you will never seek after the medicine that's going to cure you.

So Paul doesn't hold back in describing how sick the world is and how God's wrath must deal with it. But what is God's wrath? When you look up the word Wrath in the dictionary

it means anger, rage, fury, annoyance. And it's possibly from this that many people get a picture of a God who is a strict Sovereign who doesn't allow humans to do anything. But the word that Paul uses for the wrath of God is a Greek word called *orgai*. And the word *orgai* literally means to grow ripe, like fruit when it ripens.

So what does that mean in the context of God's wrath? Well it means that God is not quick to lose his temper, he doesn't lash out immediately. It means he waits to see if this sin is going to grow. He controls his response and he waits for the right time to deal with the evil that grows in sin. But neither does it mean that we as humans are unaware of his wrath. Our passage today says in verse 18 that his wrath is being revealed from heaven. In fact it actually means it has been constantly revealed throughout history. Therefore none of us can become ignorant in thinking we haven't seen his wrath before. Throughout scripture we have seen it being revealed from the moment that sin entered the garden through to the sin that placed Jesus on a cross. Remember he is a holy God and he cannot be anywhere near sin – it must be destroyed.

And sin has properly messed up our relationship with God. Verse 21 says "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him", and then verse 30 it says they are God-haters. That kind of sums up our world doesn't it? We know of people who don't want to give thanks to God, we know others especially corporate organisations that don't want God anywhere in their businesses, and then there are those who attack what comes from the church of God – they want to silence us completely. It's all there today. And when sin first came into the picture, it destroyed that relationship that God has always longed for with his people, but that's where society is going – it's not interested in a relationship – it wants to do its own thing.

So for the remainder of our examination of this reading, I want us to consider how God's wrath is demonstrated, because we might think it's that bolt of lightning from heaven when God punishes and strikes people down. But as we look at verse 24 Paul begins by saying these words, "Therefore God gave them over" and he then talks about sexual impurity, and then verse 26 Paul says "Because of this, God gave them over" and he then talks about same-sex relationships. And then in verse 28, Paul says "Furthermore.....God gave them over to a depraved mind". God gave them over. What is this all about – well it's about a wrath of abandonment.

It is that wrath exhibited by God when He turns His back on a society. One of the most tragic scenes I think in Scripture will I hope provide a good illustration. It's the story of Samson and Delilah which we all know so well. Let me read a particular section from Judges 16 to see how God steps back. By this stage in the story, Samson has become incredibly vulnerable by telling Delilah the secret of his strength. According to Judges 16 verses 18 to 21, we read this, "When Delilah saw that he had told her all that was in his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, 'Come up once more, for he has told me all that is in his heart.' Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. And she made [Samson] sleep on her knees, and looked for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair. Then she began to afflict him, and his strength left him. And she said, 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson!' And he awoke from his sleep and said, 'I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.'" – and then listen to this – "But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him. And then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains'.

You see what's happened here? Because of Samson's disobedience and sin, the Lord left him. It's the judgment of abandonment. It's a frightening thing to think about that - that you might be abandoned by God. This is God stepping back and saying to society, "You want to make the rules? Ok, have it your way, do whatever you want".

And so it's quite scary to think that God has walked away from society today because of the decisions that have been made. The more God lets go, the worse things get until it will eventually culminate in what Jesus called the great tribulation. And you might say, well God hasn't abandoned us – that is indeed correct, he hasn't abandoned the small number of people who remain faithful to his instructions – but if we look at the list of things in Romans 1 and recognise the sheer increase of these things in society, then we know that many have abandoned God and he is letting them destroy themselves. When a society becomes obsessed with pornography, when the general character of a society can be seen to be immoral, this is in effect the wrath of abandonment. When a society also exalts homosexual practice and same-sex marriages, you know that it is even sinking deeper. When a society no longer is shocked with newspapers that are full of stories that lack any conscience about gossip, where it's no surprise that people in public roles lie, and where many practices are approved because we now live in a free world, then we know things are really going down the plug hole.

But I don't want to leave us hanging in this place of hopelessness for our society. I want to finish by saying that there is indeed hope. First of all, when people look to us as followers of Jesus Christ, they should recognise a hope and a way of life that is contrary to that which is all around them, and through that incredible witness, the hope is that they would turn to Christ. And so it's really important that in this passage today, we examine ourselves and our own walk, my walk, your walk with the Lord, and assess are we seeking the Holy Spirit's help in our daily living? Because people will watch how we are outside the doors of this church – so let's not be conformed to this world.

You see eventually if we don't listen to what God is saying to us, if we follow the ways of the world, he will as this passage today says, he will give us over to our stubborn hearts to follow our own wishes. This has happened throughout scripture and it is happening again in today's society. That's what the psalmist recalls in Psalm 81, verse 11 God says "But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. <sup>12</sup> So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices". But here folks is the hope, because in the next verse; verse 13-16 we read this "If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways, <sup>14</sup> how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes! <sup>15</sup> Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their punishment would last forever'. And then hear this carefully, as God declares in verse 16 for all those that remain faithful to him, "<sup>16</sup> But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

God wants to give us good things – he's not a God full of anger towards us – but let's be clear he has to deal with sin. And therefore we must walk close to him. And how we do that, and how society can start doing it again, is to hear the Word of the Lord and obey it, to hear the Word of the Lord and obey it. And whilst this is a tough passage to hear this morning, I thank you that you have listened to the word – not my words, but God's words. And now I'd simply ask you, in your own life, as in mine, we need to obey it.

Today we are very clear as Paul says to the believers in Corinth (1 Cor 15:57) that 'The sting of death is sin [...] <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ'.