

Launching question

You're putting out your wheelie bin and meet your neighbour doing the same. They nod towards some new graffiti on the wall opposite, and comment: 'What's the world coming to, eh?' What could you reply ...?

What's gone wrong?

READ Romans 1:18-32

Write out all the statements on p 2 of these notes onto separate cards. Lay them out randomly on the floor and ask people to put them in logic order.

What does Paul claim everyone knows? how do people 'know' God?
How would Paul respond to 'Surely God can't blame people who've never come in contact with the gospel?'

What does he mean in 25a ... and by the phrase 'suppress the truth' (18)?
What are some of the ways people do this? does everyone do it?

Discuss the following statement: 'idolatry is evidence not of people's search for God, but of their rebellion against him'.

Why does the statement 'God is angry' sound so unpalatable to us?
Why is God angry? Is his anger justified? ... really?
What does God do, in his anger?
So how do we know that God is angry? how is his anger 'revealed' (18)?

How do our sinful acts fit into the sequence of thought in this passage?
Was Paul homophobic? why does he seem to single out homosexual acts?
How does 26-27 apply to people who are not homosexual?
What strikes you about the list of 28-31?
Why is the list so comprehensive?
Why does the list mix up 'serious sins' with the more ordinary?
Should I respond to 1:18-32 by trying to stop sinning and live a better life?
Why is 32 a chilling conclusion to the passage (- *more than one answer*)

Thinking it through

Why does v 18 begin with a 'For ...'?
What is the problem the gospel must solve?
Is God angry with me?
Is God angry with every single person, or are there exceptions?
How do I know whether he is angry with me or not?

Look on to 2:5-6. In what ways is the world now in relatively good shape?

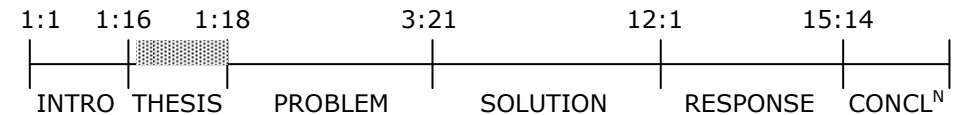
So revisit the Launching Question: what more could you say?

Summary

Paul's letter to the young church in Rome has long been understood as 'a compendium of Christian doctrine'. Certainly it is difficult to imagine a more comprehensive summary of 'the gospel of God'. But Paul writes this gospel into a specific context, appealing to both Jewish and Gentile Christians to accept one another just as God accepts both (which he does on the same basis, from the same plight, by the same means). These studies focus on 'the melodic line' of this gospel running through the letter.

The gospel logic

Paul writes *Romans* with a very tight logic:



For example, 'the response' depends on understanding what Paul means by, and why he uses, the phrase 'God's mercies' to summarise all he's just written, in 12:1 (cf 11:32). Similarly, it's vital to be clear what Paul defines as 'the problem' or we may struggle to see why 'the solution' solves it. Hence this second study.

Theme Sentence

Everyone is facing God's wrath because everyone has wilfully rejected him.

Ideas for application

- This passage should affect our view of God: we don't comfortably or easily accept the thought of his wrath. We should fear him more.
- In evangelism, we approach friends with the understanding that they do 'know' God (21) but have wilfully rejected him. This is not what our world generally believes about God, and is very scary for them.
- We need to treat sin seriously. It begins in the mind (which fits well with what Jesus teaches in Matt 5:21-30): which causes us to look more carefully at our attitudes (especially towards God). Also, the sins that Paul chooses to include (in 28-31) makes a big deal of sins we'd perhaps think are 'not that bad': we need to see it all as terrible.
- The problem with sin is its consequence. This stimulates an urgency to warn friends whose life seems OK, but who are headed for disaster.

Commentary

The key starting point is to note the sequence of thought in these verses:

19-20	the created world reveals God's eternal power and deity <u>so</u>
21, 28	mankind knows God <u>but</u>
18, 21-23	mankind suppresses the truth about God <u>so</u>
18	God is angry <u>and</u>
24, 26, 28	God hands mankind over to do what he wants <u>so</u>
22-23, 25	mankind starts to worship idols <u>and</u>
24, 26-27, 28-31	mankind cannot think straight and sins <u>and</u>
32	mankind even approves of sin in others

18 is linked to the preceding verses by the word 'For'. So Paul is telling us here the reason why God's powerful, saving gospel is needed: all humankind faces the wrath of God.

It is commonly held that we need to be saved from our sins, but the sobering truth is that we need to be saved from God himself: just as he reveals his righteousness in the gospel (17), so he reveals his wrath to all. The purpose of both is to lead people to repentance/faith.

The fact that God is angry is an uncomfortable subject, but one on which we need to be clear. Some commentators have depersonalised God's wrath into 'the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe' (ie it's just a way to talk about the effects of sin). But it is clear here that this is personal: the fact is that 'God gave them up' (24, 26, 28), not merely that 'they were given up to ...'.

We are mistaken when we think that a righteous and loving God can't be angry. The opposite of love is not wrath but indifference (just as the opposite of wrath is also indifference): God cares enough to be bothered when his love is spurned. We must not equate God's anger with our own, which is frequently out of control, selfish and irrational (ie fundamentally unrighteous): his anger is always righteous.

19-20 refers to what is normally called 'general revelation': a revelation of God made to all people everywhere (cf Acts 14:17; 17:26f). It's important to be clear of its limitations: creation only reveals to people that God is there and that he is God (- it doesn't, for example, tell us that he is Saviour, or how we can be saved, etc). Psalm 19 is a good cross-reference which contrasts general revelation (v 1-6) with the

more effective 'perfect' revelation of Scripture (v 7-11). But despite these limitations, creation has told everyone enough to 'know' God.

- 21 And therefore humankind is without excuse as we 'suppress the truth' (18), don't 'acknowledge God' (28) and 'exchange the truth (that God is there) for a lie (that he is not)' (25). Crucially therefore, note that
- (a) sin is rebellion against God (rather than being 'wrongdoing', as we usually think. These wrong acts or 'sins' are the outward manifestations of our rebellion, which is the 'sin').
 - (b) sin is wilful, deliberately rejecting what we know (23, 25, 27).
 - (c) sin is stupid (22), as we prefer the 'made' for the Maker!
- 23 Idolatry is absurd. Fancy breaking for independence but only running as far as mere images as a substitute for the immortal God (23), and a lie rather than the truth (25). These preposterously 'bad deals' reveal the futility of our thinking and our darkened foolish hearts (21). No wonder the Old Testament not only forbids idolatry (Exodus 20:4), but also ridicules it (Isaiah 44:9-20)!
- 24, 26, 28 Three times we are told that God's 'handing over' is his specific response to our rebellion. There is a dreadful reciprocity in his judgment against us: when we reject God, God rejects us.

It is possible to underplay God's role in this. He does more than merely leave us to ourselves; he actively hands us over to further rebellious acts, condemning us to be enslaved to our sinful selves. It may require a big change in our thinking if we are to recognise these sinful acts for what they are – not *the cause* of God's wrath, but *the present evidence for its reality* (18).

24-27 The first 'category' is sexual sins, and this focus should not surprise us. If God made humankind in his own image (Gen 2:23-25), then humankind's rejection of God is bound to lead to the undermining of these primary relationships. Homosexuality is named, therefore, not because it is a greater sin than any other (cf 28-31), but because it is the clearest evidence of a rejection of God's order in creation. Homosexual sin is patently 'against nature' (ie the way that our bodies are made indicates that heterosexuality is the 'natural' form of sexual expression): Paul's point therefore is that homosexual practise is evidence that our acts have been distorted by our distorted thinking.

28-31 The second 'category' is 'every kind of unrighteousness': the list is overwhelming and comprehensive. There's no scale of 'better' or 'worse' sins – envy, for example, is put next to murder. Because all kinds of sins are included, it is a list in which everyone can find themselves, for all have committed at least some of them. The point is thus made: all humankind is under God's wrath.

32 This passage is unusual in the Bible by concentrating on God's wrath in the present. Normally, the primary focus of God's wrath is the future and this verse points us forward to that 'day of wrath' (cf 2:5-10).