

Romans 1:18–3:20 – The Valley of Sin

In our introduction to this letter last week, we considered Paul's defence of the gospel and his rallying statement to the Christians in the house churches of Rome that he is **unashamed** of the gospel, recognising and declaring its power to save people who put their belief and faith and confidence in Jesus.

He is unashamed because:

- 1) Our enemies have been defeated by the risen Jesus
- 2) Through the righteousness of God, **everyone** is welcome

Last week, was all about the gospel - the **good news**.

This week we get to the **bad news**.

This week we descend into the valley of sin, before we can climb up and out to the sunny uplands of salvation.

When you go to the Jewellers and want to buy a beautiful diamond ring, the Jeweller will place the sparkling diamond on a black velvet backdrop, so that you can see its beauty and brilliance in sharper relief and more clarity.

As we look at the subject of sin and the human condition, we are laying out the black velvet cloth, so that we can see the diamond of the gospel more clearly.

I don't think we sometimes fully understand how good the good news is – because we don't fully understand how bad the bad news is!

We are considering how bad it is – how sinful we are – so that we can better and fully appreciate the amazing good news of the gospel.

We will only appreciate how amazing the grace of God is towards us when we realise the extent to which we have been forgiven,

the depths that God has lifted us out of, the darkness of the valley, the hope to which we have been called.

If you remember, a large part of Paul's message, read out by Phoebe, is dealing with the simmering tensions between Jews and Gentiles. They have a very different view of how to live out their newfound Christian faith – they are clashing over traditions and rituals – and what it means to be **made right** with God.

Our section of the journey today compares and contrasts some of the ways that these groups think they can be made right with God – and the way we today think the same.

Paul doesn't pull his punches – he just pulls the rug from out under their feet and leaves them on their backs like a bunch of upended turtles – helpless and hapless in their own attempts to get right with God.

We ended last week revelling in the good news. Paul now pivots in verse 18 to the bad news that contrasts with this.

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,**

25 They **exchanged the truth about God for a lie,** and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator

Paul explains to them that people are **without excuse**. God has made plain his existence. Creation all around us demonstrates God's divine power and invisible qualities.

"Whether or not someone has heard the gospel, everyone can discern something of what God is like from the world around us. As an artist reveals their personality on canvas, so God displays his "eternal power and divine nature" in creation." Andrew Ollerton

19-20 "what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 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**."

I was watching a property renovation programme a while ago. Amanda Holden and Alan Carr buy a property in Italy and then do it up – or they pretend to, while a bunch of professional builders come in and do all the hard work.

In one of the scenes, after a busy day of work, the two of them sit and watch a beautiful Italian sunset while drinking a glass of wine and they have the following conversation:

AH: "I am not particularly religious, but I definitely have faith in something greater and I'm a huge believer if you put good out, good comes back ..."

AC: "When you look at this view here, there's got to be something bigger, there's got to be."

AH: "It's not a bearded man in the sky, not someone judging us all the time. I think in life you have to have belief, even if it's just in you."

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. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

We are sinful and we have suppressed the truth of God for a lie.

We worship and idolise created things rather than the Creator God.

I was talking to someone recently who was raised in church but no longer attends and no longer follows Jesus. One of the things they said to me was that where the church is getting it so badly wrong is telling everyone **how sinful and bad they are**. That from a young age we are all told that we are **sinners** – that we are bad. Born sinful. “No wonder we all turn out so screwed up”, they said to me.

That conversation was last week.

And the passage this week leads me to tell you how bad and sinful you are – we all are.

But I think my conversation partner was wrong. Is wrong.

Example of £10 note – distorted but still carrying the image of God.

This is us. We have inherent value and dignity – we are made in the image of God, to have a relationship with God. But our lives apart from God are distorted, screwed up.

The answer of Amanda Holden and many others is to look to ourselves for salvation. To sort ourselves out. To think that we are basically good people. The term for that is humanism.

Others put their belief in nature and the environment.

Some in their rationality and intelligence.

In the late 1960s, American psychiatrist Thomas Harris wrote a self-help book entitled “I’m okay, you’re okay”. It was tapping into this self-improvement narrative – I am the master of my own fate. It was very popular and was on the NYT bestseller list for weeks on end.

In the 1990s, Wendy Kaminer wrote a critique of the self-help movement – and her book was called “I’m dysfunctional, you’re dysfunctional”.

How in the world can we say we are all okay, she asked. This is narcissism. It is silly. It is plainly not true.

A pastor and theologian in the 1970s, called John Gerstner, referenced the book “I’m okay, you’re okay” as well.

He and his wife were on a trip to Asia and were taking a boat excursion with their grandson and a local boatman who didn’t speak much English. Their boat collided with another, covering them all with water. The boatman became very agitated. John and the other occupants had gotten splashed and were a little wet, but he reassured the boatman – I am ok, we’re ok, we’re ok – don’t worry.

But the boatman just got more agitated as they approached the dock – John Gerstner repeated his assurances – Don’t worry we’re okay. I am okay. You’re okay.

Just then the boatman shoved the occupants of the boat onto the dock and shouted – I not OK, you not OK - his boat had been holed beneath the water. Seconds later it disappeared beneath the water...

This is the message of the Bible – this is Paul’s message – I not okay, you not okay – we are all sinners. We are all lost. Our boat is holed. If we don’t know it, we are going to the bottom!

Many of us don’t know it. Many are still arguing – I’m okay, you’re okay. Some think Christianity and the Bible are messing us up by telling us otherwise – by telling us we are sinners.

The Jews and Gentiles of Paul's day were scrapping it out. Who was righteous? Who was OK? Which rituals and laws they needed to follow to make sure they were right with God.

We still do that today.

In verses 24-32, Paul outlines the way some of this looks – and he is probably describing more the Jewish view of the Gentiles and their behaviour.

The phrase repeatedly used is “God gave them over”....

He let us have what we wanted.

“You asked for it, you got it.” (Tagline in a movie)

And what we wanted ultimately separated us from him.

And his anger and his judgment is directed at that sin – at its destructive power – how it ruins us and our life.

Jesus told a story about a lost son – the prodigal son - who left his father and his house behind and went and did his own thing, while his elder brother stayed behind.

Much of the list here would fit him quite well...

Sexual impurity – lust instead of love – wickedness, evil, greed, depravity.

Gossip, slander, arrogance, boasting....

And Paul says – people not only do these things, but they also approve of others that do them and promote them as good and praiseworthy things.

As Phoebe reads out this list to the gathered Christians there is perhaps a mixed reaction in the room.

Some of those gathered perhaps find themselves described.

Others, might find themselves sitting a little taller, feeling vindicated in their religious observance and moral superiority.

As she describes the downward slope of idolatry and sexual immorality, imagine Jewish Christians leaning in: Yeah, sock it to those pork-eating, idol-worshipping, pansexual Gentiles!
Andrew Ollerton

The trap is set. Phoebe draws breath and launches into Romans 2:

"If you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one.
(Romans 2:1 MSG)

Some are in the prodigal son camp. They can see themselves in the mirror of this description.

Others are like the older brother in Jesus' story – they feel that they have lived a good life, served well in church, kept a fairly clean slate, and are not as sinful as some others clearly are.

Paul is ensuring that none of us can avoid the valley of sin.

It is possible for those of us who appear to live "good" lives to look down on "bad" people as if they belong in a different category. Of course, criminals, bullies, warmongers and Manchester City fans belong way down in the valley. But I'm a good person with higher standards... Andrew Ollerton

If Romans 1 condemned **unrighteous** prodigal types, Romans 2 turns on **self-righteous** Pharisee types, who think their religious deeds put them in a different category.

Paul probably has in mind Jewish believers who think that “works of the law” especially circumcision, sabbath and food laws, made them exempt from the **wrath of God**.

In Romans 2, Paul is calling out a particular form of pride and hypocrisy that God's people have been guilty of since way back when.

Many people still assume that good works and religious commitments take them higher up the mountain.

But whether it is **unrighteousness** or **self-righteousness** that marks us – neither matches the **righteousness of God** held out in the gospel as outlined in verse 17:

1:17 “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.’

Romans 2 pulls the rug from under proud feet and condemns the kind of moralism as a false religion guilty of hypocrisy: “**you ... pass judgment on them yet do the same things**” (2:3)

Paul poses a question that everyone must answer, whether religious older brother types or rebellious prodigal son types:

“**Do you think you will escape God's judgment?**” (2:3)

Jew or Gentile. Unrighteous or self-righteous. Churchgoer or not.

Paul takes us by the hand into the valley of sin. And only when we have looked up at the mountain from this valley and thought **I cannot do** this are we ready to begin the ascent – ready to receive the gospel.

There is something refreshingly honest and strangely unifying about Romans 3:22-23

22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Romans is a dose of realism. I not OK, you not OK.

3:9 Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

This truth about our sinfulness does not **demean** us or **devalue** us – as my recent conversation partner stated. It **diagnoses us!** It **delivers** us! We are made in the image of God, but that image has become distorted by our rejection of God – by our sin.

If we are going to get better – if we are going to be saved – we need to diagnose our sickness, to acknowledge our sinfulness.

We help no-one by downplaying our sin or excusing our rebellion.

The gospel tells us that all have sinned but all are welcome. Whether Arab or American, male or female, gay or straight. The toughest section of Romans is a dose of realism that cultivates honesty.

Andrew Ollerton

We cannot stand in the judgment – we cannot meet the standard – we cannot climb the mountain out of the valley of sin - we can only stand in Christ.

We are not crushed by the standard – we look to the beauty of Jesus and his perfect law-keeping.

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death." (Romans 8:1-2)

The beautiful diamond of the gospel shines so brightly against the black backdrop of our sin!

The bad news is very bad.

The good news is amazing and freeing – and almost unbelievable.

Though sin abounds, grace abounds even more.

Grace top trumps sin.

Paul will get there later in his letter – when they are all on their backs having had the rug pulled from under them.

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by **believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For **"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."****

Romans 10:9-13

Community group questions and discussion points:

Romans 1:18–3:20 – The Valley of Sin

1. **Seeing the bad news (Romans 1:18–20)** Paul explains that God has revealed something of himself through creation, yet people suppress the truth about him. What can creation teach us about God, and in what ways might people today ignore or suppress that truth? How might we sometimes do this ourselves?

2. **The Creator or created things? (Romans 1:21–25)** Paul says that people exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped created things rather than the Creator. What are some things people today are tempted to put at the centre of their lives instead of God? Are there any good things in your life that risk becoming ultimate things?

3. **Made in God's image, distorted by sin** The message used the illustration of a £10 note that is distorted but still carries an image. How does this help us understand both our inherent value as people made in God's image and the reality of our sinfulness? How should this truth shape the way we view ourselves and treat others?

4. **The danger of self-reliance** The message highlighted the temptation to look to ourselves, our goodness, our intelligence or our achievements for salvation. Where are you most tempted to rely on your own efforts or believe that you are basically a good person who can manage without God? What would it look like to depend more fully on him?

5. **The prodigal son and the older brother (Romans 1:24–32; 2:1–3)** The message described two responses to sin: the rebellious *prodigal son* and the self-righteous *older brother*. Which of these attitudes are you more likely to recognise in yourself, and why? How can religious activity or outwardly good behaviour

sometimes hide pride, judgement or a lack of dependence on God?

6. Judging others (Romans 2:1–3) Paul warns that when we judge others, we can condemn ourselves because we may practise the very things we criticise. Why is it often easier to notice the sins of others than our own? Is there someone or a group of people you tend to look down on, and how might God be challenging your attitude towards them?

7. Good works and being made right with God (Romans 2:17–29; 3:9–20) Paul challenges the belief that religious observance or keeping the law can make us righteous before God. Why can church attendance, serving others, knowing the Bible or following Christian traditions become sources of false confidence? How can we value these things without treating them as a way to earn God's acceptance?

8. All have sinned and fall short (Romans 3:9–23) Paul declares that Jews and Gentiles alike are under the power of sin and that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Why is this truth difficult for some people to accept? How does recognising our shared need of grace break down barriers of pride, background, morality or religious tradition within the church?

9. The beauty of grace (Romans 1:17; 3:22–24; 8:1–2) The message compared the gospel to a beautiful diamond displayed against black velvet: the darker the backdrop, the more clearly the diamond shines. How does a deeper understanding of sin help us appreciate the grace of God more fully? What difference does it make to know that, through Jesus, there is no condemnation for those who belong to him?

10. Living in the freedom of the gospel (Romans 10:9–13) The message concludes that we cannot climb out of the valley of sin through our own efforts; our hope is found in Jesus Christ, who welcomes everyone who trusts in him. Where do you need to stop striving to prove yourself to God and instead rest in Christ? What is

one practical way you can live this week in the freedom, humility and gratitude that come from knowing you are saved by grace?

Closing reflection and prayer

Invite everyone to take a quiet moment to consider:

Where am I still trying to prove that I am “okay”, rather than acknowledging my need of God's grace?

Pray that God would give the group the courage to be honest about sin without losing sight of their dignity as people made in his image, and that a deeper understanding of the valley of sin would lead to a greater love for Jesus, a stronger appreciation of his grace and a more welcoming attitude towards others.