



## WHY GOD IS ANGRY WITH HIS WORLD

We have been thinking about the wonder of God's revealed Word and the need for us to read it for ourselves. This has prepared us for the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans, in which he set out his understanding of the gospel of God. We needed to understand at the outset how special and how different these writings are. Paul was not writing to explain his own understanding of the gospel. Far from it! His clear emphasis was upon the fact that this:

- ✓ was the gospel promised by the prophets in God's Holy Scripture (Romans 1:1,2);
- ✓ concerned the Lord Jesus Christ who is the centre of God's plan and purpose (1:3,4); and that
- ✓ it was Jesus who had called him to be an apostle (1:5).

The Good News, he explained, was God's, not his; and it puts Jesus at the centre of everything.

### ❖ God is Angry

No sooner has the apostle made those introductory remarks than he launches into an explanation that must have startled and troubled his first century readers. It should trouble us as well. The gospel can save you, he says, if you believe it (Romans 1:16,17), but without it you and all the inhabitants of the world are in deep trouble. Here are his actual words:

*“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18).*

Paul says either, we are considered right with God, because of the things we believe, or we are very definitely in the wrong. None of us likes being in the wrong – with our parents, or relatives or our employer – but it's a much more serious and dangerous thing to get on the wrong side of God. None of us wants to be the subject of God's righteous anger. So why is God so angry with the world He has made, and what can we do about it for ourselves? A careful look at Romans chapters 1 and 2 will explain all we need to know and will show us what avoiding action we should take. But take a moment to stop to think about something.

At the very start of his letter Paul tells his readers that there is a real problem facing mankind. Why does he do that, instead of spelling out the gracious plan of salvation that God has been carefully working out from the very beginning?

Do you go to the doctor or the clinic when you are feeling all right? Of course not! You only go when you think there is something wrong with you that needs to be put right. And that's exactly how the apostle is approaching the question of our spiritual health. If we think that everything is all right, it is unlikely that we will pay God's Word the attention it deserves. It is only when we know that the situation is serious that we will recognise that we need God's help.

### ❖ Wake-Up Call

The news that God is angry with mankind is designed to alert all mankind. It should tell us that things are seriously wrong in our lives so far as God is concerned and that we need to give this our most urgent attention. If your employer was angry with you, you would want to know straight away what had upset him or her. As it turns out, it is quite easy to work out from Paul's letter what is upsetting God. He is angry about people who:

- **Are ungodly and unrighteous** – people who suppress that truth that God has revealed (Romans 1:18);
- **Ignore the evident truth all around them** – they do not acknowledge that the world has been created by God. If they opened their eyes they would be bound to see the evidence that God made everything, because the design apparent in creation points to the great Designer, just as it was intended to (1:19-21);
- **Know of God's existence but choose to worship other things.** Many cultures and civilisations have a sense of the existence of God, but many people deliberately suppress those senses. Instead of worshipping God they choose to please themselves, or worship possessions or things that they have made (1:22-23).

### ❖ Divine Designer

This penetrating analysis goes right to the heart of the matter. One of the earliest arguments given in support of God as Creator was that of design. As long ago as 1800 a writer argued that if he happened to be walking along and found a watch on the ground he would immediately wonder whose

it was. It would never occur to him that it might just have happened into existence: that would have been absurd! A stone perhaps: a watch never! In the same way, he said, finding the world to be so wonderfully constructed and so carefully made, we should be asking ourselves – “*Whose world is this?*” and “*Who made it?*”

### ❖ Bible Prophecy

Of course, there are a lot more arguments that can be advanced to demonstrate that God exists apart from that of God the designer of the Universe. We have been thinking about one of them already when looking at the wonderful revelation contained in the Bible. Who but a divine and all-seeing God could have given such marvellous advance notice about the coming of His Son, the Lord Jesus. Hundreds of years before his birth, a detailed picture of his life was given so that when he came people would know this was the Coming One. It says a lot about the perversity and blindness of mankind that the Lord was despised and rejected when he came, instead of being readily accepted and followed.

Bible prophecy is a marvellous testimony to the existence of God, as it is intended to be. Who but a divine creator could have predicted the future of a mighty city in the ancient world that was, in its day, the equivalent of Washington or New York in today’s world. Yet the prophet Isaiah said:

***“Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendour and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there wild goats will dance”*** (Isaiah 13:19-21).

That was precisely what happened to this mighty city of the ancient world – the one with the hanging gardens that was one of the wonders of the world. It fell into absolute decay and ceased to be inhabited. In time it was lost under the sand dunes of Iraq and was only rediscovered after careful search was made for it. Exactly as predicted, the Bedouin came to regard the site with superstitious dread and would not even pitch their tents there.

If you think that remarkable, as indeed it is, consider what God said about the Jewish nation when he described their history and that of the city of Jerusalem. Through many different prophets, and at many different times, the Jews were told that if they disobeyed God they would suffer the consequences. Moses, for example, said that this would happen:

***“The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and at evening you shall say, ‘If only it were morning!’ because of the dread that your heart shall feel, and the sights that your eyes shall see”*** (Deuteronomy 28:64-67).

Moses spoke those words nearly 3500 years ago and they have become remarkably and horribly true over the last 2000 years. When the Romans brought the troublesome Jewish state to an end and dispersed all its inhabitants, they left the land and the city of Jerusalem desolate. By doing this they started the process that Moses had warned about. The Jews became a homeless people, scattered throughout the entire world. To this day there are Jews in most places of the world, and now there are Jews back in the land their forefathers once inhabited. The nation that was dispersed is now being regathered, again just as the prophets of God predicted would eventually happen. Here’s just one of those prophecies:

***“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land”*** (Ezekiel 34:11-14).

Who would have been able to predict this remarkable happening, except Almighty God, who both knows the future and controls world events? The Jews had been away from their former land for more than 1800 years, and had suffered generations of abuse and ill-treatment during that exile. The climax of their suffering was the horror of the Nazi concentration camps, where some six million Jews perished. But now the nation is back in its ancient land – just as God promised – and exists as a political state which is now recognised among the nations. And their ancient capital city Jerusalem is back under Jewish control.

## ❖ Mankind Astray

We have looked at just two pointers to the existence of God – the evident design that exists all around us, that points to a Designer; and the remarkable way in which God’s Word foretells the future, across hundreds and then thousands of years. Again, it would be possible to spend a lot of time thinking about that subject, but we need to get back to the apostle’s prime concern.

Having made the point that God’s existence is clearly demonstrated by the world that He has made, Paul now charges mankind with the crime of wilful ignorance. What should have been obvious to everyone has been deliberately ignored. They are “*ungodly*”, “*unrighteous*” and take no notice of these great truths, and deliberately suppress their God-given sense of someone or something which is above and beyond them. But we need to look a little more closely at the apostle’s description of mankind in its present godless state. Using just the first two chapters of Romans, this is how the apostle summarises the unhappy state of people:

*“They became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1:21);*

*“God gave them up to a **debased mind** to do what ought not to be done. They were **filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless**” (1:28-31);*

*“Because of your **hard and impenitent heart** you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgement will be revealed” (2:5);*

*“For those who are **self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness**, there will be wrath and fury” (2:8).*

This is only one section of Scripture, and we need to base our understanding on all that God has revealed. But even this brief summary contains a clear picture of what has gone wrong with mankind. Notice first that the problem is one of a futile or debased “*mind*” and a foolish, hard or impenitent “*heart*”. Something has happened to human nature that has made it both insensitive to and estranged from the will of God. Instead of being inclined towards the obvious conclusion – that since God exists He should be worshipped – mankind now takes the contrary position. Men and women live to serve themselves; their natural inclination is to glorify mankind. They prefer to worship things – the created rather than the Creator. Or, in Paul’s inspired words:

*“Although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. **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 reptiles**” (1:21,22).*

This is why God is angry with His world and its people. He gives them everything and they give Him nothing back, not even the recognition of His existence. Most people make no attempt to seek God and find Him, despite having every opportunity to do so. The apostle Paul once addressed some thoughtful and influential people in Athens and summed up the situation like this:

*“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since **he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything ... that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him**” (Acts 17:24-27).*

## ❖ What Went Wrong?

It was never meant to be like this, so far as God was concerned, and His righteous anger is directed at mankind because man has gone so far astray from what God wants to happen. God did not make men and women with characteristics like those Paul has described – hard and impenitent hearts, futile minds, self-seeking and self-serving, and suchlike. Quite the contrary: the Scripture says that God made the first man and woman:

*“In his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).*

The reference to “*male and female*” shows us that we are not being told that this was a physical image, for there are physical differences between the sexes. Instead it was a spiritual likeness, something to do with the mental and emotional condition of the created pair. They were made to worship God and to be His companions; so they had all the attributes needed to make that relationship possible. But they were also given an opportunity to make their own choices and develop their own

preferences. God made them free agents. He did not create robots or automatons. He put them in a situation where they could develop characters and learn to overcome challenges. The garden eastward in Eden was a place of learning and growing where mankind could learn and develop spiritually. But wrong choices were made and the result has been disastrous.

Later in the Letter to the Romans, Paul will carefully analyse what Adam did in Eden which brought sorrow and sadness, death and disaster into the world. As he later explains, this was the dreadful mistake that Jesus came to put right. For the moment we need to notice that two things occurred in Eden which changed human nature. God had given a Law – the first one ever given, and one which gave Adam and Eve the opportunity to show their willingness to obey God. It was such a simple thing that nowadays people joke about it, but it was a very important issue. They could eat of any tree of the garden except for one. That forbidden fruit – on the one tree that showed the difference between “right” and “wrong” – was therefore called “*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*” (Genesis 2:17). Eat it and suffer the consequences; or resist the temptation and continue to live in harmony with God – that was the challenge!

### ❖ Return to Dust

Adam’s failure was an act of wilful disobedience – the New Testament makes that clear, as we shall see in due course. There were two consequences of that act of rebellion. First, it resulted in the sentence of death being passed upon Adam as God had indicated: “*Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*” (Genesis 2:17). This sentence was not just restricted to Adam however, it passed to all mankind for all are descended from Adam and have inherited his mortality:

*“To Adam he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, **till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return**”* (Genesis 3:17-19).

The whole of Adam’s life was changed as a result of this action and so is ours. Whereas he might have continued to live with no fear of death, now Adam would die, and so would his descendants. God delayed the punishment, but it came in due course. His death is listed in the same chapter which contains a long list of his successors (Genesis chapter 5), all of whose life-histories end with the words “*and he died*”. They died and we still do: death is a universal experience and God’s words clearly mean what they say.

Death is the end of life – it is a process of turning to dust and that is how it is understood all through the Bible. The lie that was first put to Eve suggested that she would not die (Genesis 3:4), but that breaking God’s law would be advantageous. It was said that would do them both some good. Curiously, that is what a lot of people have come to believe about death – that it is a gateway to another and better life; that it commences another existence in heaven, or suchlike.

In Chapter 5 – *The Problem of Sin and Death* – we will look at these questions in more detail and will see that some popular ideas about the afterlife have no support in the Bible. For the moment, note that when God said death would result if His law was broken, He meant that Adam and Eve would cease to exist if they broke His commandments. Their lives would end; and so they did.

### ❖ Change of Nature

There was something else too that happened at that time – a second consequence of Adam’s disobedience. Again it is something which affects us also. Just as we inherit a mortal nature because of what Adam did, we also inherit Adam’s tendency to please himself, rather than God. He was not created with that tendency, for God made both Adam and Eve, and all creation, in a condition which is described as “*very good*” (Genesis 1:31). But once he had disobeyed God it seems that this became a principle by which he chose to live. Adam had the capacity to become like God in some respects, but he chose a different path. From then on all his descendants developed the tendency to move away from God, rather than towards Him. By nature, they preferred to disobey rather than to obey Him.

We can see this moral change very early in the Bible account. The third son born to Adam and Eve was called Seth. The inspired record records that he was born in Adam’s “*own likeness, after his image*” (Genesis 5:3). Adam had been made in God’s likeness, with the possibility of becoming godlike in his actions and attitudes. But all Adam’s children were born with a tendency in a different direction – they were self-centred. Cain, Adam and Eve’s first child, demonstrated what that meant in practice in a most tragic way. He and his brother Abel were encouraged to worship God: Abel did this in the way that God had indicated, by bringing an animal offering. Cain brought vegetables instead, disregarding what God required. God accepted Abel but rejected Cain, and Cain promptly killed his brother and then lied to God about what he had done. You can read about it in Genesis chapter 4.

Two chapters further on, and 1600 year later, the world was already totally godless. Everybody was following Adam's lawless example: they were all choosing to please themselves rather than obeying God. As it turns out, there were only eight people left in the entire society at that time who were willing to listen to God's commandments and to obey Him. All the rest are described in this way:

***"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:5-8).***

The Bible never wastes words, so when it uses all those words to describe the human condition – ***"the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"*** – you can see how serious the situation had become. God decided to destroy the entire society and to start again with Noah and his small family, and that is why the flood came. God was angry with the people in the world that existed before the flood. He was sorry that He had put man on the earth and it grieved Him to His heart – and He is equally angry with our world.

### ❖ 21st Century World

Remember that the words used to describe our modern society are much the same as those that occur in early Genesis, before the flood. People today are *"futile in their thinking"*, their hearts are *"foolish"* and *"darkened"*; their minds are *"debased"*; they are filled with *"all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless"*. They are *"self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness"*. All these are expressions we found in Romans chapters 1 and 2, and there is something else too.

Three times the apostle says what God is doing about all this. Nothing! Paul tells us that God has determined to let the world alone for the time being so that the full effects of sinful and disobedient behaviour will become apparent. Our immoral world has long-since left behind the laws of God. It has made its own rules for living and set its own standards. God's values and laws are now challenged by many people who wish to determine for themselves what they accept as "right" and "wrong". Here is the divine assessment of today's society:

***"God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 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. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done" (Romans 1:24-28).***

God by no means approves of many of the things that are happening today, which are contrary to His revealed Law. In this passage express mention is made of homosexual and lesbian practices which are declared impure, dishonouring and contrary to nature. The fact that these things are now being tolerated in society does not mean that they are right. It merely shows that God is biding His time, and is still giving some people the opportunity to choose a different way of life. His *"kindness"*, *"forbearance"* and *"patience"* are being shown to us to give us a chance to come to repentance (Romans 2:4).

### ❖ Two Classes of People

God has allowed men and women to behave as they wish for a period, but the Scripture says that God will not tolerate this for ever, and all the indications are that He will intervene very soon. So there is no time to lose if you want to take advantage of God's gracious invitation to change direction and choose the things that please Him. We all have to decide where we stand. Either we go the way of the world by accepting its values and adopting its attitudes, or we find a way that is right with God. Paul says this about that class of people:

***"He (God) will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality,<sup>7</sup> he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality" (Romans 2:6-11).***

So there is a different way: one that will bring us back into God's favour. It is the way that will result in life and not death; the one in which we can be reckoned to be right in God's sight, not wrong. As we progress in our reading of Romans we shall see what this involves and what we can do to be found on God's side, when He brings this present evil age to an end and starts again with something which is so much better.

### **Things to Read**

- 📖 If you haven't already read the Letter to the Romans then read chapters 1 and 2. This will help you to see the way in which Paul presents his logical and well-reasoned arguments.
- 📖 As everything starts in Genesis, and as Paul will later have such a lot to say about Adam's failure, reading Genesis chapters 2-4 will give you a lot of helpful background.

### **Questions to Answer**

- 4.1 The events at the time of the Flood in Noah's day are very similar to what is about to happen. What can we learn from the Flood which will help us? (Matthew 24:34-42; Hebrews 11:6-7; 2 Peter 3:3-15)
- 4.2 The Bible says that right at the end of human government, before God takes direct control, things will be very bad on earth. Why do you think that we may have reached that time now? (1 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 3:1-7)