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SERIES: The Gospel Is
MESSAGE: God's Response to Our Desperate Need Pt. 1
PASSAGE: Romans 1:18-32
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

Have you ever been absolutely desperate? Absolutely desperate. The kind of desperate that has you down on your knees, searching, searching for just a shred of hope. The greater our desperation, the greater the joy is when good news finally arrives.

The gospel is God's good news story. But in order for us to truly understand how good that story is, how good that news is, how great that news is, it's important that we fully understand how desperate our need is.

This morning as we continue our study of Romans, Paul is going to take us on a journey to help us understand, to take us into the heart of our desperate need, the heart of the bad news. In order to help us understand just how much we are in need of saving, how much we need the good news.

So open your Bibles with me, to Romans chapter 1. We're going to be in verses 18 to 32 this morning. Now, last week, we covered the theme verses of this letter, where Paul says, he is not ashamed of the gospel, and the reason he is not ashamed of the gospel is because the gospel is God's power for salvation. It's his power to save. And then he says, the Jew 1st and also the Greek. So it's because of that Paul was not ashamed. He, rather, boasted in the gospel. He was proud of the gospel. He was eager to preach it.

Now that raises a question, of course: If the gospel is God's power to save, what exactly do we need saving from? And that's what's going to become very clear this morning.

Now, as we dig into this passage, I want to give one note of context concerning Paul's audience. We said last week that Paul was talking to a church community that was made up of both Greeks and Jews. And it appears that in verses 18 to 32, Paul is really focusing in on Gentiles, but all the while, he is clearly demonstrating that he isn't only speaking about Gentiles, he's speaking about everyone.

So when we read this passage this morning, I want you to think of it this way: This is Paul's story of human history, this is your story, this is my story—this is all of our story apart from God. So with that in mind, let's dig into these verses. Verse 18:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Now, verse 18 marks the beginning of the body of this letter, where Paul is going to go into deep detail concerning the gospel. And he begins in a place that we might not have expected. He begins with the wrath of God. "For the wrath of God is revealed."

Now, the wrath of God is something that we don't talk about a lot in modern Christianity. I'm not saying that is a good thing. I don't think that's a good thing. But I think the reason people are



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hesitant to not talk about God's wrath is at least founded on decent, oh, desires. There's good intentions, even though I don't think the practice is good. Here's why I think that we're hesitant: I think most of the time when we hear the word wrath, what we think of is unbridled, chaotic, severe, even illogical anger. Someone just lashing out.

So imagine that you hear that your neighbor is a little upset with you. They're angry with you, and that wouldn't be a good feeling. We'd all agree we don't like that. But I believe it would feel different if I said to you, hey, I heard your neighbor is about to unleash their wrath upon you. I think we'd probably go lock our doors. That's concerning because that's the way we think about wrath, that wrath is like anger times a 1,000—1,000 times worse than anger. And so it's because of that, that often in the church, and among Christians, we're a little hesitant to talk about God's wrath because we know God's not like that.

But, God's wrath is clearly an important part of understanding who he is. It's clearly taught in scripture. Paul makes it very clear, and so our job is not to just respond to how we feel about that word, our job is to dig in deep and understand what it truly means.

So here's what God's wrath is: God's wrath is his measured, justified, righteously angry response to evil and sin that has ruined his perfect creation. His measured response. Not overly emotional, not erratic. It's not God flying off the handle. He's looking at his world and he sees the corruption that sin has brought about, and he is upset about that. He is angry about that and justifiably so. In fact, I think we would say that if he were not angry when his perfect creation has been corrupted, I think we'd say, I don't know that he's worthy of worship if he doesn't care at all about what he created.

So God acts out and is wrathful about the ruin of his creation. That ultimately means that his wrath is an expression of his care, of his commitment to his creation, of his love for what he brought into existence. So God's wrath is revealed. His wrath is his response to sin and evil, and that's just what Paul said. He said, God's wrath is revealed against what? All ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

Ungodliness, unrighteousness. Those are two words that essentially means sin, evil, that which is against God. God is against the sinful embrace that has taken place among all mankind. Rejecting him and embracing evil. So when that has happened, when human beings, when men, embrace sin, what happens? What is the path that begins to unfold? Well, Paul makes it clear, the first thing that happens is there is a suppression of truth. A suppression of truth.

Now, truth in the New Testament always refers to what God has clearly revealed about himself, about his intentions and about the world that he created. Truth is what you can count on, the way God has designed things. And so when human beings embraced sin, they suppress the truth. To suppress the truth means you don't want to hear it, you stuff it away, you put it over in the corner. That's the course that sin takes.

So the question is, how exactly did this happen in this story of human history in the corruption of God's design? How did it happen? So here's how it happens, verse 19:

19 because that which is known about God is evident within them;

And again, when he talks about them, think all people.

that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.



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In other words, God has made himself known. He has left evidence, bread crumbs all over the place, pointing back towards him.

It's been said that the worst moment for an atheist, someone who has rejected God, who suppressed the truth of God, the worst moment for them is when they feel thankful, but realize they have no one to thank. An amazing sunset. You see the wonder of creation, the majesty of mountains, the depth and the grandeur of an ocean as you look out over it, you hear birds singing and you well up with gratitude, but if you have suppressed the truth, there is nowhere to direct the gratitude.

See, Paul's making it very clear, God has made himself evident. Through what he has created, it is very clear that behind it all is an eternally powerful divine creator that has designed it all. And because he has left his evidence all over the place, it is therefore justified for Paul to say that no one has an excuse. He says, therefore, they are without excuse. In other words, no one can say to God, "if you had just made yourself a little more clear, if you had just left a little more evidence." God has left ample evidence, but in embracing sin, what we are bound to do as human beings is suppress the truth and ignore the evidence. Therefore, we are without excuse.

See, there's something very deep here about the nature of sin. Here's what sin does. Sin blinds. Sin obscures the truth. And left to ourselves, this is all of us, we are unrighteous. We are ungodly. We are the kind of people who do and have suppressed the truth and ignored God's hand in the world. This is us. Paul is not here talking about particularly bad people. He's talking about all people. This is the course that sin takes. This is bad news. This is bad news. And as he continues, the news gets even worse, verse 21:

21 For even though they knew God

They had evidence of him, they had seen evidence that pointed to his invisible attributes, as Paul said earlier.

even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

The sin takes us on this horrific journey. It's a descent, a downward spiral into more and more chaos. He says, "even though they knew God, they didn't honor him or give thanks to him." Now, if we see God as he truly is, we encounter him in all his incorruptible glory, the only proper response is worship. To worship him, to give him gratitude, to give him thanks, to honor him. That's what worship is.

But in embracing sin, what human beings do and have done and continue to do is they catch a glimpse of God. And then they decide to reject him, put him in a corner and ignore him. Reject him. And where does that rejection lead? It leads to futility. A mind that is darkened, a mind that is confused, futile in their speculations. When someone is given over to sin, they can't even think straight anymore, everything is confused.

Not only do they fall into futility in their speculation, I'd suggest they also begin to be pretenders. They have to profess to be wise, even though they aren't wise. They're becoming foolish. They pretend. Pretend they know what's going on, even though the reality is everything is out of order. Sin leads down a perilous path. And it leads to confusion and foolishness and blindness of heart.



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See, sin distorts everything, but here's one thing sin does not do, and it cannot do: It doesn't change our fundamental wiring. See, as beings made in the image of God, we were made for him. We were made to worship him. That's what we're hardwired for. That's what our heart longed for. But in rejecting him, humans still long to worship something. And so when the proper object of worship is removed, the story of human history is they have to search for something to worship.

So what Paul says is human beings have over and over again turned towards false worship of false gods, which can just be summed up in this word: idolatry. Idolatry, false God. He says they worship, and they change the glory of the incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man, and for birds and four-footed animals. You know, cows. Things like that. Creeping things. Crawling creatures.

Here's what sin does: It inverts everything. It inverts God's world, inverts God's intentions. Down, is up, up, is down, left, is right, right is left. Everything is confused and disordered. See, God created us as human beings in his image, and then he gave human beings domain. He said now, oversee the earth, subdue it, rule over the beasts of the earth. And here's what sin does. That which we as human beings are supposed to oversee, we began to worship. We begin to submit to them. Because sin inverts everything. Sin brings distortion and chaos and confusion. Brokenness. All of it a diversion, a deviation from God's original design. And all of it, because of that, is deserving of his wrath.

His perfect creation has been distorted, has been ruined, has been corrupted. And I think we could say, if God were not angry about that, we could rightly ask, do you even care? And he does. God is not going to passively look at sin and the ruin that it brings. God is going to respond. And his wrath is his response. His wrath was revealed because of sin.

So the question therefore is, well, what form does God's wrath take? How does he respond? And his response, I think, is probably going to surprise you, verse 24, he says.

24 Therefore, God gave them over in the lust of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. 25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Even in the midst of this dark history, Paul can't help but erupt in praise when he considers, Almighty God who created all things.

Here's the form his wrath takes for now: God gave them over. Three times we're going to encounter that word in the next few verses. That is God's response. It is active, his active, saying to us as human beings, "okay, if that's what you want, go get it." He gave them over in the lust of their hearts.

Lust means obsessive desire. He gave us, he gave human beings what we obsessively longed for. What we obsessively long for. They were given over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity. That word impurity in this passage clearly has sexual overtones, and that's why it makes perfect sense that as Paul continued, he said, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. They engage their bodies in that which was impure.

Now in the next few verses, he's going to unpack that, and we'll turn to that in just a moment. But before we do, let me let me retrace our steps. Here's the dark descent into moral chaos that sin has taken humanity on. In an embrace of sin, there has been a suppression of the truth, ignoring of the truth, which has led to an exchange of the truth of God for a lie. And that has resulted then in



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improper worship, of turning to the creature and worshiping the creature rather than the creator. Turning to idolatry.

Now, there are parts of the world where idolatry is everywhere, it's right in your face. When I travel to India, Nepal, and Malaysia, you're walking down the street and you see a temple and there's right there, an image made of stone or wood that is representing a god, and they worship and they offer sacrifice to those very tangible idols. There are parts of the world where that's very active.

I think the challenge for us in our world is that's not as active, so we have to think about what does idolatry look like in our context. And I'd suggest to you that for me and for you, for each of us, the greatest danger, in terms of us making someone the center of the universe other than God, the greatest candidate that we all are tempted to put there, is ourselves. It's me. It's you. I want what I want. I want to have my way. I want to be on the throne. I want to be in charge. I wanna direct everything. I would like to be satisfied no matter what the cost, thank you very much. Self-worship. Worship the creature rather than the creator.

Now, when that happens, we enter into a life that is absolutely deficient of purpose and joy and life, because we were made to worship a person worthy of our worship. And so when we turn our worship to that which is unworthy of it, our lives become empty. The story of human history is the story of humans over and over again, seeking satisfaction and fullness and purpose in something other than God.

Now. Here's the kicker. When that happened, most of the time, the first place that we turn as human beings for satisfaction is towards our bodies, we seek to satisfy our bodies and feel something. And most of the time, the most potent punch is found in sexuality. Engaging in illicit sexuality. That is where human beings over and over have turned, and so in what we will see next, Paul directs our attention. He brings into view a very particular way that sin distorts God's purpose. And one which serves as a very tangible, very vivid example of the rejection of God—the rejection of him as creator and the rejection of him as designer that has intentions for his design. That's what we find in verses 26 and 27. So Paul says:

26 For this reason

And again, the reason is the rejection of God as designer and creator.

For this reason God gave them over

There it is again.

to degrading passions; for their women exchange the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

So let's think about Paul's context. Paul is from a Jewish background, and there's one thing that is abundantly clear. The Jewish people, based on the truth of the scriptures of the Old Testament, had a very clear understanding of God's design for marriage, God's design of men and God's design of women. From the very first pages of Genesis, it is abundantly clear. God created them, male and female, period. And God gave them purpose, made them in his image. God created man, he created woman, as counterparts, one for another.

Just a few pages later then in Genesis that the institution of marriage is established, where it's very clear, God designed marriage to be the coming together of one man and one woman in a union



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that is for a lifetime. That's God's intent for marriage. Now, within that context and only within that context, God designed sex to be an act of a man and a woman coming together in deep intimacy. And when it occurs in that context, it is very good, and it is glorifying to God. Because it's us as men and women operating according to his design.

There is no question that Paul was abundantly clear on that point. Because the Old Testament is abundantly clear on that point. And as we turn to the New Testament, the New Testament authors all agree with this fundamental sexual ethic concerning marriage and sexuality and maleness and femaleness. All of it is clear.

So with that established, that's where Paul's coming from. We then have to remember, what is he trying to do? In verses 18 to 32, Paul is making the case and he's making it in a stark way, and he's making it very clearly that we, as human beings, are in desperate need because of sin. We are in desperate need because of sin. He has already outlined how sin has led to a rejection of God, a rejection of proper worship, and a rejection of God's design for everything.

And so now, as we get to verse 26 and 27, Paul's point is this. It's not that homosexual sin is the worst of all possible sins. That's not Paul's point. Rather, here's his point. His point is that homosexual acts, and by that, I mean the active engagement of sexual acts, men with men, women with women, that are contrary to God's design, they serve as a vivid demonstration, a vivid example of the result of the suppression of the truth and the rejection of God, and rejecting that he designed the world a certain way, completely contrary to his design.

He's not saying, okay, this is the worst sin, point your finger at this one. That's not what he's saying. It is clearly sin, make no mistake. But what he's saying is this example captures what happens when, in pride, we embrace idolatry and we reject that our world was created by a designer. And the designer is the one who dictates the terms of sexuality and maleness and femaleness. That's Paul's point. This is what sin does, distorts everything.

Now this is obviously a very delicate topic, and I am laboring to be abundantly clear, because it is a very personal topic for me. Here's what I mean by that. There are people in my life that I am very close to—and I'm not going to go into the relationship—but people that are very close to me who are in a struggle with homosexual desire, and they are seeking with all of their heart to honor God, to honor Jesus, and to obey him, and to submit to his design for sex and sexuality. They are willing to say, "it doesn't matter what I feel, my sexuality is submitted to God's design." And with that person, I want to walk right beside them and cheer them on and remind them, this is what is true, this is the way God designed the world, and as we align with it, we flourish. That's the way it's designed.

Now, there are also people in my life that I am very close to who have rejected God, and are currently actively living in sexually immoral relationships, including homosexual relationships. And with them, as a follower of Jesus, here's what I'm called to. I am called to love them as God loves them. I am called to be hospitable to them. I'm called to care for them, and I am absolutely called to stand for what is true. And make that abundantly clear, as a church, we cannot compromise on the truth of God's word. This is going to be an issue that is not going to go away, no matter what happens. This is gonna become a more and more prevalent issue in our culture.

And so as we walk through moments like this, it is very important that we completely stand firm on the truth, and we don't compromise one inch on God's design and God's intent. And it's also incredibly important, that as we do that, we do it in the manner of Jesus.

Now here's what I mean by that. In Isaiah 42, it describes what Messiah is going to be like, and it said this. "A bruised and battered reed he will not break." See, Jesus had this capacity to absolutely



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stand firm the truth, never compromise. He was both strong and compassionate. And that's precisely what our current cultural moment calls for right now for us. It's what we are called to embrace, to be strong, to stand for the truth, and to be compassionate, to love people the way that God loves people. And I believe empowered by the grace of God, we can do just that.

But make no mistake what Paul's doing in this passage. Paul here is not giving us a dissertation on sexuality. I've spent extra time on it because I think it is a hot topic, we need to be clear on it. But he's not giving us a dissertation on sexuality. That's not what he's doing. What he's doing is outlining what sin does. He's showing us this downward moral spiral that comes as the result of suppressing the truth of God, rejecting God. And he's making it abundantly clear why God's wrath is absolutely justified. Justified because of sin. And we sit under it because we ourselves are sinners. His wrath is justified because his good creation has been distorted and corrupted by evil and by sin.

So now as we come to the close of this passage, he's highlighted this very vivid example of sexual sin. But I think as we close, Paul wants to make it abundantly clear that the effects of sin, the way sin has run its course in the world, are more numerous than we can possibly imagine. Sin is just everywhere. He already gave an example. But his intent wasn't to allow us to step away and focus on that one example. It's to highlight this deep problem.

We are in desperate need. And so as he continues, he gives us a catalog of sin. He's just going to name one after the other, and if we humbly, with humility, will listen, I think each of us will find ourselves somewhere in this very catalog. Verse 28, he says:

28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over

There it is again, he gave them over...

to a depraved mind to do those things which are not proper, 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

Can you imagine? I always look at my kids on that one.

31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 32 and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

In other words, they not only do them, we not only do them, sometimes we even cheer those who do them on. It's a sobering list. I think each of us could say that there are a few in there that we did struggle with before we met Christ, and maybe we still struggle with. Because trust me, even though we're talking about our desperate need for the gospel, sin still wants to do this. Sin wants to ruin everything. We all to one degree or another, can find ourselves in that catalog.

I understand there are some that are very extreme, you know, "murder." Well, probably not too many murderers in here. "Haters of God." That is a strong statement. "Evil." You know, those are strong. But then there are some that you're like, ah, I see myself in there. Greed. Envy. Deceit, gossip. Disobedient to parents. Now, that's very real. That's not how God designed the world. Untrustworthy. Unloving, unmerciful. All of these are a deviation from what God intended. This was not the way he designed things to be. All of it is a diversion. It's moving away from how God set the world up. And therefore, all of it is evidence that sin has run its course and has brought ruin into God's good creation, and ruin into the lives of the people that he created, including you and me, and all of it. Is deserving of his wrath.



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In fact, Paul said in verse 32, those who practice such things are worthy of death. That's bad news. Our world, human beings, if left to ourselves, we are stuck on the downward descent, the spiral into more and more moral chaos brought about by sin. We are in a tailspin and we cannot gain control on our own. We are in desperate need.

Now, if you have never come to Christ, this morning here's the question, I believe, this text poses: Are you willing to admit your need? If you have come to Christ, do you remember how desperate your need was? And are you aware that sin still can't compromise your salvation, but it does seek to wreak havoc in your life?

The gospel is God's good news. Because our world is broken. I asked last week the question, "what is wrong with the world?" And we agreed that it is very clear, the biblical word for what is wrong with the world can be summed up in this one word. It's sin. Sin is what is wrong with the world, and Paul has graphically laid that out for us.

But the challenge for each of us this morning is to study and to sit under these words, to hear from God and to not fall into the temptation to say, "Oh yeah, there is a lot of sin out there." "There are a lot of problems out there." "You know what? I have a friend in my small group, they really need to hear this." It's to say, "Lord, but for the grace of God, this is me." This is me. Sin is not just some general problem in our world. Sin is my problem. I am in desperate need. Because left to myself, without the grace of God, I am stuck in the tailspin of the chaos of sin.

There's a story that—it's probably fake. It's almost too good to be true. But the story goes like this. In 1910, the London Times sent a question, a prompt, to a number of thinkers and writers and essayists, people like that. And the prompt was this: write us and tell us your answer to the question "what is wrong with the world?" Now, one of the people they sent that prompt to was the Christian writer and essayist, a really witty guy, a thinker—his name was G.K. Chesterton. G.K. Chesterton got that prompt and he quickly wrote out his response. Here's what he said, he wrote the London Times and he said:

Dear sirs,

I am.

Yours,

G.K. Chesterton.

What is wrong with the world? Well, in a very real sense, I am. Because left to myself, I am stuck in sin. Each of us has a desperate problem. We are in desperate need of help. We can't do it ourselves. We are desperately lost, apart from God. That is us, each one of us. So, thank God for his gospel. Because the gospel is God's power to save. The gospel is God's response to our desperate need.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we acknowledge to you that, left to ourselves, without your grace, we are utterly lost and desperate. So we thank you that in love, you sent your son that by grace we might be saved. And Lord, we glory in that. We thank you for that. But we also ask today as we study this text, as we reflect on these things, Lord, help us. Give us a sober mind about the dangerous reality of sin. And Lord, if there are those among us this morning that have yet to give their life to you, I pray that now you would impress upon them just how desperate their need is. And we thank you that we



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don't have to save ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. You're the one who does it by your grace. We thank you for these things. We pray them in the name of your son, our Savior Jesus. Amen.

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