



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### The Wrath of God is Revealed Romans 1:18-23

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In her book, *Cold Comfort Farm*, Stella Gibbons paints a vivid picture of young Flora Poste's first and only visit to the Church of the Quivering Brethren. Her cousin, Amos Starkadder is the pastor. The service begins with the congregation singing a hymn with the chorus, "The earth will burn but we will quiver", while a man at the front conducts by angrily waving a fireplace poker. Flora asks someone next to her why the poker and she's told, "To put us in mind 'o hell fire!" Then Cousin Amos goes to the pulpit and he begins to preach:

"Ye miserable, crawling worms, are ye here again, then? Have ye come like Nimshi son of Rehoboam, secretly out of yer doomed houses to hear what's comin' to ye? Have ye come, old and young, sick and well, matrons and virgins (if there is any virgins among ye, which is not likely, the world bein' in the wicked state it is), old men and young lads, to hear me tellin' o' the great crimson lickin' flames o' hell fire?...*Ye're all damned!*" Amos goes on to rebuke the congregation as they sit there quivering, "Ye know, doan't ye, what it feels like when ye burn yer hand in takin' a cake out of the oven or wi' a match when ye're lightin' one of they godless cigarettes? Ay. It stings wi' a fearful pain, doan't it? And ye run away to clap a bit o' butter on it to take the pain away. Ah, but' (an impressive pause) *'there'll be no butter in hell!*'"<sup>1</sup>

Now, that's the sort of hellfire and brimstone that a lot people think of

when they hear the phrase, "the wrath of God". Just listen to how people respond to the idea of God's wrath. Just listen to how people respond to the idea of God's judgement. Even for many Christians, these ideas of wrath and judgement bring to mind the image of God as an angry tyrant in the sky, just waiting to rain down fire and brimstone on anyone foolish enough to break even the smallest of his seemingly arbitrary rules and commandments. That's how popular culture understand the wrath of God. And as I said, even Christians struggle with this. Marcion was one of the very first heretics. He found it impossible to reconcile the God of the Old Testament with the Jesus of the New and so he threw out the whole Old Testament. He was far from the last person to do this.

I say all this because today we'll be looking at Romans 1:18-23 and Paul starts out here with the wrath of God. In fact, to some people it's rather jarring. As we saw last week, Paul has been explaining why the gospel is truly good news and why he's not ashamed to proclaim it. The gospel is literally good news. It's the royal announcement that Jesus, crucified and risen, is the world's true Lord. And in verses 16 and 17 he wrote that even though this message is blasphemy to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, he is *not* ashamed to proclaim it. Why? Because this announcement about Jesus is God's power for salvation. This is the announcement about how God is going to rescue and redeem his Creation. Specifically, Paul writes, this announcement about Jesus reveals or unveils the *righteousness* of God. It shows us what he's been up to all along. God made promises long ago to Abraham and to Israel and to David, and while many people may have lost hope in anything ever coming of those promises, Jesus shows how, in him, God has done what he said he would do and fulfilled his promises. This is the righteousness of God, his faithfulness to the covenant he made

with Abraham and with Moses and with David.

And Paul quoted that bit from Habakkuk: "The righteous shall live by faith". That was true of Israel when the Chaldean army was ready to wipe them out in Habakkuk's day and now, Paul says, it's true of you Christians living in Rome, right in the heart of everything that's wrong with the world, right where Caesar could snuff you out at any moment. And it's true for us today, too. We live in faith in the righteousness of God, in faith in his covenant faithfulness, knowing that what Jesus began, Jesus will also one day finish. And that's obviously good news. In his resurrection Jesus has pulled God's future age, where everything has been made new, Jesus has pulled it into the present for us so that we can live in hope of God's age to come.

But that's not all Paul has to say about the good news. Look now at verse 18. Paul's been saying that the gospel is God's power to save *because* of this and then, *because* of this, too, and now he says that it's also good news, it's also God's power to save *because* of one more thing. He writes:

**For [or because] the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.**

The gospel announcement about Jesus is good news, it's God's power to save—and, remember, *it is reason not to be ashamed*—because in it the wrath of God is revealed. This is pretty counterintuitive to the world and it's counterintuitive to a lot of Christians today. Many of us *are* ashamed to proclaim the good news about Jesus precisely because we're ashamed of having to tell people about the wrath of God. Many modern books on preaching and on church growth actually warn preachers and churches against talking about sin or about the wrath of God and argue that it will only turn people away. But

<sup>1</sup> Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 96-98.

that's only because our culture—and even much of the Church—doesn't understand the wrath of God. We think of it as angry choirmasters waving fireplace poker in the air or red-faced preachers, like Amos Starkadder, bellowing "You're all damned!". But, Brothers and Sisters, that's not what Paul's talking about.

Paul was steeped in the Jewish Scriptures, in the Old Testament, and for the Jews the wrath of God, his coming in judgement, while it was certainly something to be looked on with awe and trembling, was a *joyous* thing. Brothers and Sisters, for Israel the wrath of God meant that he was finally coming to fulfil his promises and set everything right. They didn't think of it in terms of the angry killjoy in the sky punishing people for breaking his arbitrary rules. They saw a loving and just God coming to bring justice in a world full of injustice. Think of the scene in a movie where you sat on the edge of your seat as some poor damsel in distress cowered at the mercy of a villain and think how you cheered when the hero came in, guns blazing, rescued the girl, and brought justice to the villain. That's the way Israel envisioned God coming in his wrath. In the Exodus, in particular, Israel had seen how God is faithful to his promises and they had seen his wrath when he delivered her from Egypt. It was something to behold with fear and trembling, but it was first and foremost a day of rejoicing. God's justice triumphed over the injustice and ungodliness of Egypt and her false gods. As God would promise again in another desperate situation in Jeremiah's day, "I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless." (Jeremiah 15:21) God is the hero who comes to the rescue and to bring justice to the villain. Our problem is that we fail to grasp just how villainous the villain is. We fail to grasp just how badly God's justice is needed in the world. We also have a profound propensity to forget our own part in the ungodliness

and unrighteousness of the world. Paul will get to this shortly.

This great day of rescue is what Israel hoped for in the coming of the Messiah. And now the gospel proclaims that Jesus *is* that Messiah. Israel rejected him, the people crucified him and in doing that they tried to declare that he wasn't the Messiah after all, but God raised him from the grave and proved that Jesus really is the Messiah, that he really is Lord and King. And here's the point Paul is making in verse 18: This means that Jesus is *also* the judge who has come to set everything to rights. In his resurrection he's set in motion the renewal of all things, he's pulled God's age to come into the present, giving the world a foretaste of the kingdom right here in the Church as he transforms us and makes us new. From the resurrection of Jesus until the day of final judgement, whether the world chooses to acknowledge it or not, we live before the unveiled face of the Judge.

This is what Paul's getting at when he writes that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. Ungodliness and unrighteousness. This is the heart of the human predicament. It's interesting that Paul doesn't start with sin. If I were ask what's wrong with humanity, you might say, "Well, sin is what's wrong." When we think of the wrath of God, whether it's the people with the messed-up view that see God as the angry tyrant just waiting for people to break his rules or even if we see his wrath from a biblical perspective as we've seen here, we tend to think of his wrath being directed at our sin. Paul will go on in the next part of the passage to talk about sin, but his point here is that our problem doesn't start with sin. The problem starts with "ungodliness". Our core problem isn't so much a behaviour problem so much as it's a *worship* problem. It's *idolatry*. We were created to bear the image of our Creator. We were created to serve and

represent him in his Creation, to live our lives before his face in love and in faith. But we've rejected that vocation and have chosen to serve ourselves. Sin is then the symptom of and the working out of our basic heart problem of idolatry. Paul's point here is that God's wrath is against those who refuse to acknowledge him and who, in doing so, set his Creation wrong.

God is righteous, he's faithful. Our word "righteousness" doesn't do Paul's Greek word justice. Paul's word for righteousness embodies not just righteousness in the sense of rightness, goodness, and holiness, but it's also the Greek word for justice. God is just, but in rejecting God, humanity has turned Creation upside-down and unleashed *injustice* into the world. And it's not just that, but Paul says that we in our injustice, in our unrighteousness, suppress the truth of God. Human beings are living in rebellion, but we refuse to admit it so we suppress the truth. We tell ourselves that we're masters of our own destinies and that we are the masters of Creation. We do our best to write God out of the picture.

Paul goes on in verse 19-20:

**For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.**

Creation itself reveals the Creator. Not in the fullest sense and not with saving power, but Creation reveals enough that we should know better. As the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon wrote not long before Paul's time, "From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (13:5). In fact, Paul seems to

be drawing heavily here on the Jewish thinking that we see in the Wisdom of Solomon. Creation reveals the Creator sufficiently enough that it ought to cause us to question our rebellion. Creation reveals the Creator sufficiently enough that we have no excuse for our rebellion. We cannot claim ignorance. But we suppress this truth anyway and since Paul's day it seems we've come up with ever more sophisticated ways of doing it. Paul writes in verse 21:

**For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.**

The proper response to the knowledge of God is worship and thanksgiving, but in our suppression of the truth our minds have become corrupt and our hearts have been darkened. God gave us minds to reason, but when we cut God out of the picture we corrupt our own thinking. We've been given minds to reason, but instead of reasoning to good, we reason to do bad. We could reason out how to help the poor, but instead we reason out how to steal from them. We could reason out how to love our neighbours, but instead we reason out how to hate and hurt them. We could reason out the goodness and glory of the Creator from the marvels of Creation around us, but instead we reason out how to deny the Creator even exists. We claim to be wise, but we're really a pack of fools, bent on injustice, bent on unrighteousness. And it's not just our minds. Our hearts are dark too. The more we suppress the truth, the more we reject the vocation for which God created us, the more we're driven to serve only ourselves and our own selfish interests. And the more we all do this the more we put God's good creation out of joint.

And so Paul writes:

**Claiming to be wise, they became fools...** (Romans 1:22)

And fools do foolish things.

**...and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.**

There's more to this than we might realise at first glance. This is the story of Genesis 3, the story of our fall as a race, but overlaid on top of it is Israel's failure too. First, Genesis. We were created to serve and worship our Creator. He placed us in the garden to be his stewards, his representatives. He created it all as a demonstration of his goodness and then he called us to trust him—to live in obedient faith—and to give him the glory he is due. But we rejected God's wise rule and his wise commands. Instead we chose to listen to the serpent and his lies. The serpent told us we could be gods ourselves. We trusted him instead of God and we exchanged God's truth for the serpent's lie. But it was too late. We had already chosen allegiance to the creature over allegiance to the Creator.

New Testament scholar James Dunn describes it well, I think. Listen to what he writes. It's about Adam and Eve, but it's also about each and every human being who has followed them. "This failure to respond aright to God was not simply an oversight or an act of thoughtless petulance. They actually claimed they were being wise in thus turning their back on God, that it was an act of sophistication and sign of high intelligence to declare their independence from God, as though the refusal to acknowledge God as God in their daily living made them something more than creature. But what they took to be an attitude of great wisdom simply demonstrated their folly. The consequence was that they became less, not more capable of directing their own life. Seeking to rise above their creatureliness they

actually regressed rather than progressed."<sup>2</sup> Seeking to be wise, we've become fools. Seeking to rise above our creatureliness, we've fallen to something lower.

That's the lot of the human race. But Paul also overlays Israel's story over this picture of the general human problem. The language he uses is borrowed directly from Psalm 106. Paul takes us back to Israel at Mt. Sinai. The Psalmist writes, "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt" (106:20-21). They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox. Do you remember the story of the golden calf? There was Israel at the mountain. God had just shown his goodness, his faithfulness, that he was worthy of their worship. He'd not only come to Israel's rescue in Egypt, but then he took her through the Red Sea and had destroyed the Egyptian army. Moses was up on the mountain being given the Law that told the Israelites how to serve and worship God. And while they waited and became afraid that Moses might have been struck dead by the lightening on the mountain, they chose to turn their jewellery into a golden calf so that they could worship it the same way the Egyptians worshiped their gods. Paul's point is that Israel has the same problem that the rest of the human race has. We're all idolaters. We've all exchanged the wisdom of God for our own foolishness.

Now, we don't worship golden calves anymore, at least not in our part of the world. We look back on ancient peoples who carved their gods from wood and stone and think that somehow we're not that primitive. But that's just us suppressing the truth again. The false gods they worshiped in their carved idols personified sex and money, power and violence and

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<sup>2</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), pp. 71-72.

nature. We sophisticated and modern people have done little more than cut out the middle man—the carved idol—so that we can worship sex and money, power and violence and nature directly. We worship the creation instead of the one who created it and the result is everything we see wrong in the world around us. The disease is us—specifically our idolatry—or as Paul writes in verse 18, our *ungodliness* and our *unrighteousness*. God is faithful, but in our rejection of him we reveal our unfaithfulness. And unrighteousness and injustice are the result as we wreak havoc in God’s Creation.

And because the Creator is passionate about his Creation, because he desires to set it right, his wrath burns against our idolatry and our injustice—the same way our anger burns at the man who would abuse a child, the same way our anger burns when we see the injustices and the evils of our world perpetrated on the innocent. And yet as we are prone to lashing out in rage or losing our tempers in our wrath, God is both *patient* and *longsuffering* in his wrath. He is justified in being angry with us for defacing his image, damaging his Creation, hurting one another. He will not let it go on forever. If he let evil go on unchecked he would not be a good God. He must judge ungodliness and unrighteousness. But he is also the God who determined to redeem and restore his Creation rather than wipe it out in his wrath to start all over again. He is the God who sent his own Son into the world, to die himself for the idolatry and sins of his people. In our idolatry we stand condemned and, because God loves the world, Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem those already condemned. Jesus came to deliver us from the wrath of God. The day of Jesus’ resurrection was the day for which Israel had longed and prayed. Deliverance finally came. You and I can look back on the Resurrection of Jesus with joy, knowing that in him we have been

forgiven for our part in humanity’s rebellion, but we can also look forward in hope, knowing that one day the Jesus will return as Judge to finish what he started, that he will return to confront injustice with justice, unrighteousness with righteousness as he sets all to rights. Our duty in the meantime is to live the new life he’s given, it’s to leave behind our idolatry so that we can serve and worship the living God, and it’s to unashamedly proclaim the good news about Jesus—to proclaim to all the other condemned idolaters around us, that they too can find forgiveness in Jesus and be restored by his Spirit to their vocation of love and service and worship of our Creator.

Let us pray: Righteous Father, you Created us in an act of love, but we chose to rebel. You created us to worship you and we, instead, have chosen to worship and serve ourselves. We’ve suppressed your truth because we do not want to face the reality of our idolatry and the justness of your wrath. But in your love you have given your own Son. You have opened our eyes, you have brought us to repentance and faith, you have given forgiveness and restored us to your life and you have given us hope of the day when Jesus will return to set all to rights. In the meantime, give us grace and strengthen our faith that we might live before the eyes of our judge in faithfulness and righteousness and hope. And as we proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord, remind us never to be ashamed, for it reveals your wrath against ungodliness and is the only source of hope for our world and for those who continue to suppress the truth. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.