

## Romans 1

1. There are several points of contact between Romans 1 and Genesis 1-3: “Paul refers to the *creation of the world* (2) and to the classification of its creatures into *birds and animals and reptiles* (23); he uses the vocabulary of *glory* and 'image' or 'likeness' (23); he alludes to the human being's knowledge of God (19, 21), the resolve to become *wise* (22), the refusal to remain a dependent creature (18, 21), the exchange of *death* (32; cf. 5:12+)” (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 70). Is the root sin described in Romans 1 the same as that of Adam and Eve? Who is described in Romans 1: Gentiles, Jews, or all humans?
2. *God's Anger*: Read Mt 3:7; Rev 19:15; Rom 2:8; 4:15; 12:19, and choose one:
  - . God is angry at sinners (just as a parent can be angry at a beloved child).
  - . God is angry at the sin but not the sinner.<sup>1</sup>
  - . God's “wrath” is “the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe” (C. H. Dodd, quoted by Stott).

Is your answer consistent with Mt 5:21-22 (*Sermon on the Mount: you've heard don't murder; I say don't be angry*), Mk 3:5 (*Jesus is angry at the Pharisees who try to trap him at the expense of a crippled man*), James 1:20 (*the anger of humans does not accomplish the righteousness of God*), Col 3:8 (*put aside anger and wrath*); John 3:16?

3. *God's wrath* is “revealed from heaven” (18) in a peculiar and unexpected way: no fewer than three times in Romans 1 we read that God “gave them up” to their sin. This flies in the face of the common thunder-and-earthquakes view of God's wrath, but is consistent with various other passages, including the departure of God's Spirit from the Temple in Ezek 10; the warning of Psalm 81:12; God's judgment on Ephraim in Hos 4:17; God's judgment on Israel's worship of the golden calf in Stephen's speech (Acts 7:42; also 14:16); and Paul's decision to hand the sinner over to Satan in 1 Corinthians (5:5; also 1 Tim 1:20).
  - . Does God do this to believers (and the Church) or just wicked humanity at large? Do you feel you can point to anything like this that you have observed, locally or globally?
  - . What light does this cast on the problem of suffering (whether by the innocent or the wicked)?
4. In Paul's day just about everyone worshiped *something*. While casual atheism is now much more common, idolatry has not vanished; materialism, which Paul calls idolatry (Col 3:5), is in the very air we breathe. Paul's indictment of humanity begins with idolatry and continues with a staggering number of sins (over 22), giving a special place to sexual impurity and homosexual practice.

How does idolatry relate to the other sins in Rom 1?

5. Paul gives a special place to sexual sin and especially homosexuality in 1:20-27. Of this passage, Wright writes, Paul assumes that there is [a structure to the created order itself]; that is, that creation is not random or arbitrary. Taking Genesis 1 as the primary theological statement, he sees humans created in God's image and given charge over the non-human creation. Humans are commanded to be fruitful: they are to

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<sup>1</sup> “The alternative to 'wrath' is not 'love' but 'neutrality' in the moral conflict. And God is not neutral. On the contrary, his wrath is his holy hostility to evil, his refusal to condone it or come to terms with it, his just judgment upon it.” [Stott]

celebrate, in their male-plus-female complementarity, the abundant life-generating capacity of God's good world. And they are charged with bringing God's order to the world, acting as stewards of the garden and all that is in it. Males and females are very different, and they are designed to work together to make, with God, the music of creation. Something deep within the structure of the world responds to the coming together of like and unlike, something which cannot be reached by the mere joining together of like and like. [*Paul For Everyone, Romans Vol. 1, p. 21*]

Wright believes this "helps to explain the otherwise baffling fact that the very first instance Paul gives of what he sees as the corruption of human life is the practice of homosexual relations." Do you think his argument that complementarity is integral to the pattern of creation and new creation is *supported* by Scripture, or is it merely *consistent* with Scripture? If true, what does it have to say to those attracted to the same sex?

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*Fun translations:* Translators have fun with 1:31. The Philips' translation's earnest, "**they mocked at learning, recognised no obligations of honour, lost all natural affection, and had no use for mercy**" is rendered with poetic brevity by the NRSV: "**foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.**" *The Message* is at least as memorable, with "**stupid, slimy, cruel, cold-blooded,**" comparable to the NASB's "**without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful.**" Despite this stiff competition, the *Jerusalem Bible* is hard to beat: "**without brains, honor, love or pity.**"

*Fun quote:* "God gave them up" means simply that he left them to their own concoctions. For as an army commander if forced to retreat abandons his deserting soldiers to the enemy, he does not thereby actively push them into the enemy camp but passively withdraws his own protection over them." –Chrysostom (*ACCS*, p. 42)

## Leader's Notes

It is no overstatement to say that Romans has changed the world. Way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Romans had a profound effect on Augustine, who writes in his *Confessions*,

**From a hidden depth a profound self-examination had dredged up a heap of all my misery... I threw myself down under a certain fig tree and let my tears flow freely... Suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again, "Pick up and read, pick up and read." At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children's game in which such a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one. I checked the flood of tears and stood up... I hurried back to the place where... I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it, and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts" [Romans 13:13-14]. I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled. (8.12.28-30) [Quoted in Mark Allen Powell, 256.]**

It goes without saying that Augustine's conversion has deep effects on the church, not least on a certain Augustinian monk over a millennium later. Martin Luther also experienced his conversion while reading Romans:

**I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God', because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous... Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.' [Quoted by Stott in his commentary, p. 21]**

As if that weren't enough, a young Anglican also experienced the profound effects of Romans. Anglican priests John Wesley and his brother Charles spent two years in Savannah, Georgia as missionaries to the colonists and the native Americans, but their time there was profoundly disillusioning. On the ship back John experienced very rough seas so that he feared for his life, and it was in this state that he was confounded by the calm happiness of a group of Moravian Christians also traveling. When he asked them how they could be so calm they replied, in essence, John, you are a pastor, you must know! Upon returning to England, Wesley reluctantly attended a Moravian meeting during which Luther's preface to Romans (which you can read online, btw) was read. Wesley writes in his journal,

**About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. [Also quoted in Stott, 22]**

Now it's important to note that the Wesleys had already started their "holy club" at Oxford, and they could not have had a more sincere and godly mother than their Susannah, so their story is the polar opposite of Augustine's life of debauchery, and still quite different from that of Luther, who had no one to teach him about grace. Nevertheless,

the Spirit used Romans to speak to John about his grace and forgiveness in a way which he and the world would never forget.

Before we go any further, two questions:

### **What is your experience with Romans? What is Romans about?**

Romans is unique for its size, for its style, more like a treatise than any other, and because it is written to a church Paul had never visited, and had not founded. The standard understanding of Romans is that it is the complement of James, the king of the epistles, a careful treatise laying out the gospel of grace and demolishing works righteousness. Romans also includes several chapters on the fate of Israel, as well as some practical advice about tender consciences, but the main thrust is grace.

None of these quite explains the context of Romans:

- Most probably founded by Roman Jews who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost and brought back to the synagogues in Rome faith in Jesus as the Messiah.
- “An important event in the history of the Jews in Rome is mentioned by the Roman historian Suetonius. In his *Life of Claudius*, he says that Claudius ‘expelled the Jews from Rome because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of *Chrestus*’ (25:2). Most scholars agree that ‘*Chrestus*’ is a corruption of the Greek *Christos* and that the reference is probably to disputes within the Jewish community over the claims of Jesus to be the *Christos*, the Messiah.” (Moo, 4-5)
- Probably the Jews were able to return a few years later at Claudius’ death in 54.
- This period of time during which the church had no Jews or Jewish Christians undoubtedly changed its direction and thinking.

With this context in mind, a main goal of Paul as he rests for a few months in Corinth (where things have finally calmed down) is to use the gospel to reconcile the Jews and the Gentiles in the Roman church. He does this by appealing to the sinfulness of all people, and the example of Abraham as someone who was justified by faith. Given this context, the excursion on the fate of the Jews is not at all strange, nor the material near the end about obeying authorities or showing flexibility when dealing with believers whose consciences are more tender.

One theme which is often also seen as peripheral is the relationship between the gospel (really, the covenant) and creation. We read about the creation groaning in birth pangs and figure that Paul is just referring to anticipation of the end times. In fact, it’s God’s faithfulness to the covenant which means that humans are made new, and through humans, creation is also renewed. And we see from Ephesians that the chief sign in Paul’s day is the creation of a new race—a “new humanity” (Eph 2:15)—which is neither Jew nor Gentile but Christian.

As we begin Romans, then, we dive into the start of Paul’s argument, which centers around the unity of all people in their sinfulness...

**Leader’s note:** *Question #5 can be altered to make use of the excerpts below from an article on marriage and complementarity by NT Wright (or the [youtube video of Wright](#) reading the paper almost verbatim). I didn’t go with the article or video because of the additional time and because I think he doesn’t provide quite as much biblical basis as I’d like in these.*

**Additional note:** *I have not produced a new background sheet on Romans. Bob Hann's syllabus reviews the commentaries and resources for study of Romans is itself a great resource.*

## What is Marriage For?

*Tracing God's Plan from Genesis to Revelation*

<http://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/marriage/what-is-marriage-for>

N. T. Wright

One of the fascinating things about the Bible as we now have it – as you know, it was written over rather a long period of time – is that it begins and ends with the coming together of heaven and earth. Right at the beginning of the book of Genesis, we have those two complementary accounts of creation (Genesis chapter 1 and chapter 2, broadly speaking), and from the beginning we are told that God made heaven and earth, and that, so it seems, heaven and earth are supposed to work together. We in the Western world have often thought of heaven and earth as radically separate, as completely distinct. Indeed, some people have constructed whole philosophies in which heaven is so far away that it seems as though it has nothing whatever to do with earth. But in Genesis it's not like that. Heaven and earth are supposed to be the twin inter-locking spheres of God's good creation.

Then, as the story in Genesis 1 unfolds, we discover that there are all sorts of other things in God's creation which mirror that, which reflect it, which are likewise supposed to be complementaries. So we have not only heaven and earth; we have the sea and the dry land, we have plants and animals – a different sort of differentiation, but a differentiation nonetheless. Then, within the animal kingdom, we have of course male and female, and indeed also within the plant kingdom up to a point. And then the story reaches its great climax with the creation of human beings in the image of God: male and female together. When we read and re-read this extraordinary account in Genesis 1 (and it is one of the most remarkable pieces of writing from the whole ancient world), then we see that these complementaries all reinforce one another, and are meant to work together, so that the man and the woman together are a symbol of something which is profoundly true of creation as a whole. Not that the man represents heaven and the woman represents earth. That's a mistake that was made in some ancient paganism. The point, rather, is that the idea of these two being designed to go together, to work together, is a very profound reality at the heart of that whole story of God's good creation.

Then in Genesis 2 the focus changes and we have a different kind of story, but one which nonetheless also converges on the idea of man and woman coming together, now more explicitly in marriage where one leaves one's parents and cleaves to one's spouse, so that the two become one flesh. These two creation stories, which of course are not meant to be photographic reproductions of "what happened at the beginning," are themselves great symbolic pointers – signposts towards a deeper, stranger reality which human words are probably unable to express. But that's how symbols work, and that's how biblical symbols work; and so, right there at the start of the whole Bible as we have it and the start of the book of Genesis, we have this rich symbolic account of God's good creation in which, at its very heart, the coming together of male plus female is itself a signpost pointing to that great complementarity of God's whole creation, of heaven and earth belonging together.

When we then jump in a huge sweep to the very end of the Bible – and again, historically speaking, it's some kind of a providential -accident that the book of Revelation is now at the end of the Christian canon of scripture – we find in Revelation 21 and 22 substantially the same thing, only now at the end of the story rather than at the point of its beginning. Indeed, whoever wrote the book of Revelation – Saint John the Divine as he is traditionally called – I think must have known, as he wrote those last two amazing chapters, that this was how the story which began in Genesis was designed to reach its proper conclusion. In his vision, the new Jerusalem is coming down from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, so that the symbolism of marriage, of male and female coming together (only now it

is the church which is the new Jerusalem, coming together with Christ as the bridegroom) – this is the symbol which says that here we find the very heart of God’s intended creation. Heaven and earth were always meant for one another, and now at last that’s what’s going to happen...

Now it’s important to begin with that big picture. If we don’t, we can easily imagine that what the Bible has to say about men and women, about marriage, about all that follows from and surrounds that complicated and rich and exciting topic, is simply a set of rules. We in the Western church have tended to isolate rules from the rest of the picture. We have imagined that the purpose God wants for us is to leave “earth” behind and to go to “heaven” instead, and that God has in the meantime given us these somewhat arbitrary regulations for how he wants us to behave. (Sometimes people say that if we keep the rules we’ll get to heaven; sometimes people say that those who are going to heaven for a different reason, because they believe the gospel, should still keep the rules because that’s what God wants; but in either case there is no organic link between the rules and the ultimate goal.) So people then begin to say, “Well, these ‘rules’ might have been different; we know much better now than people did a long time ago; anyway perhaps the rules were just made up by human teachers who wanted to stop people enjoying themselves...” and so on.

Now that isn’t just a parody of the truth. It is actually a radical distortion of what the Bible is all about. As humans we are called to live as symbols of the heaven-and-earth creation which was given at the beginning and which is to be consummated, as in the book of Revelation, at the end. There are many other passages, in the Bible as a whole and particularly the New Testament, which speak in this rich symbolic way of the purpose of God. Let me give just one or two examples.

At the end of the great chapter we call Romans 8, one of the most extraordinary passages in the whole of the New Testament, we find Paul expounding with delight and almost glee the sense that the whole creation is on tiptoe with expectation because it is going to be set free from its bondage of decay to share the liberty of the glory of the children of God. He is using the imagery of “new birth,” of the new creation being born from the womb of the old. This is a fertile image, a female, birth-giving image. He is treating the picture of a woman giving birth as a signpost, a pointer, to the fact that this is what the whole creation was made for. That reinforces the picture that, from Genesis to Revelation, we have a framework, biblical “bookends” if you like, and when we move in towards the rest of the Bible we see how many other things there mean what they mean within that larger context and framework...

But when we get to the New Testament, we find something which goes clean against the assumption I mentioned a moment ago. We might expect, from the received assumption, that we would move from a strict moral demand in the Old Testament to a slackening of moral tension in the New. Not a bit of it. Jesus is very clear, in Mark 10 and elsewhere: now that he is there, launching God’s kingdom, renewing the covenant between God and his people, the creation itself is being renewed. He goes back to the beginning, to Genesis 1 and 2: God made them male and female, and insisted that the two would become one.

This was, to say the least, unexpected. Jesus’ first followers were puzzled, as many are today, by the clear and strict simplicity of what he says. His own disciples asked him how it would work out, and Jesus explained that from the beginning this was how God planned it. He grants that, in Deuteronomy, Moses gave permission for divorce. But this, he says, was because of “the hardness of your hearts.” That is one of many places in the gospel story where it seems that Jesus is hinting or implying that what is on offer in his message is a cure for the hardness of human hearts. That is a huge challenge, as much today as it was in Jesus’ day. It takes a lot of pastoral working out. These are difficult and dark areas where many people struggle today, as they have always done.

But that is the picture, and that's why it means what it means. It isn't that Jesus is saying, "Here is an absolute demand, and if you can't make it, then God can't love you." He is saying, "Here is the way humans were meant to be, and if you follow me we'll make it a reality." Actually, humans know in their bones that this is how we were meant to be. And what we all half-know (though we become skilled at covering up this knowledge), God gives in the new creation of the gospel. In this area, as in all others, we cannot achieve it in our own strength. We are invited to take it as a gift.

As we do so, and then follow that through the teaching about man and woman which we find in the rest of the New Testament, we discover again and again that it isn't just an odd rule, a rule which we might in our day object to on the basis that we have new and different scientific knowledge about how human beings actually are. It is always a statement of faith about the meaning of God's creation and about God's ultimate purposes for that creation.

Of course in our day we have had the prevailing mood of modern Western secularism. This goes back to a long tradition first of Deism, and then actually to a modern version of ancient Epicureanism. This gives people the idea that if there is a heaven, if there is a God, they are so far away as to be for all practical purposes irrelevant, so we might as well treat them as -nonexistent. So people in the Western world have lived with an implicit worldview which says, "Religion is about escaping earth and getting to heaven." Then the "realists," who think of themselves as having their feet firmly on the earth, don't want to have anything to do with heaven or God at all.

We have inhaled the air of philosophies like that for so long that we shouldn't be surprised to find ourselves, in our cultures and our societies, symbolizing something of the same in our human relationships. Split heaven and earth apart and you will split other things apart as well, one of them being marriage. That is one of many reasons why, today, many people both inside and outside the church find the biblical norm, the new-creation, new-covenant ideal of husband and wife, so hard to maintain. It is indeed something many of us have to work hard at. It's tough being a Christian in today's world. It's tough being a husband or a wife; it's tough making family life work. But that is because it is a sign and a symbol of the most extraordinary divine plan, the plan which cost God himself the death of his own beloved son. That is how God brought heaven and earth together: the death and resurrection of Jesus, nothing less. And that has to be worked out in every area of Christian faithfulness.