

## Session 2: Sin.

### What's wrong with the world?

Welcome to Session 2 of our teaching series on Romans. In this session you will find worship song suggestions, a sermon outline and a written prayer.

#### KEY VERSE:

**'For there is no distinction: for all have sinned  
and fall short of the glory of God ...'**

ROMANS 3.22–23 (ESV)

#### BIBLE READINGS:

Romans 1.18–23; 2.1–3;  
3.19–20, 23

#### MAIN QUESTIONS:

What's wrong with the world, and what is the bad news to which the gospel is the answer?

#### MAIN THEMES:

Creation, sin, idolatry,  
wrath, judgement

#### Context:

Having introduced the theme of the gospel, Paul addresses the mixed audience of the Roman church, showing that Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners who have fallen short of God's glory and are in need of his mercy.

#### Summary:

Paul presents us with the bad news of our sin, preparing us for the good news of the gospel. God, the Creator, has revealed his goodness to all, but humans have suppressed the truth about him and worshipped idols. Consequently, God's wrath is being revealed against us. And none of us is innocent – all have fallen short and need his mercy.

#### WORSHIP SONG SUGGESTIONS:

- God Of Wonders
- Indescribable
- Psalm 8 (How Majestic Is Your Name)
- Amazing Grace
- O Come To The Altar
- House Of The Lord
- Living Hope

## Reflections:

This section takes us deep into the valley of sin, challenging everyone on the way! Paul defines sin as idolatry, and considers its dehumanising power over us, before turning on those who might be tempted to judge others without recognising their own guilt. As he concludes, all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

This is a challenging section and, as such, it is worth giving careful thought to how it will be received, particularly by those who are not yet Christians or who may already have very negative views of God.

Romans 1.24–27 is a highly controversial passage, where Paul uses sexuality as a case study to illustrate his main point about the human condition. This is only one example, and in fact Paul includes others in verses 29–31. Because sexuality is such a key issue in our world today, it would not be possible to address it adequately in the middle of this sermon without obscuring Paul's larger point. For that reason, we have not focused on these verses in the sermon notes. However, we would recommend that you are mindful of those for whom this chapter will be particularly painful, and find another context to address this topic appropriately. Chapter two in the series book *Romans: A Letter That Makes Sense of Life* includes further material on these verses, as well as other recommended resources.

Since this sermon focuses on the bad news to which next week's sermon will provide the good news, you will need to think about where you leave your listeners. The last thing you want to do is bring people to a point of conviction and leave them hanging. You may want to mention that next week's talk is the other side of the coin and encourage them to come back. And even though you may not have explained the gospel fully in this talk, you could still make yourself available for conversation and offer prayer to those who would like it.

## NOTES

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## Suggested sermon outline

### INTRODUCTION

Start with a recap. In the previous session, we looked at Paul's statement that he is 'not ashamed of the gospel ... for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed' (Romans 1.16–17). The word 'gospel' means good news, but before we are ready to receive the good news, we need to face up to the bad news about the world and ourselves. Like a patient visiting a doctor, we need to hear the diagnosis before we can receive the cure.

Do you have a personal anecdote/story to illustrate this idea? (For example, a time when you received some bad news which helped you face up to some hard truths and make necessary changes in your life.)

Alternatively, you could use Andrew's illustration of the engagement ring on the black cloth.

### KEY POINTS: THREE HARD TRUTHS

### NOTES

#### 1 The truth about God (Romans 1.18–20)

- **God has revealed his nature through his creation, so that nobody has an excuse not to believe in him.**

This talk has the potential to be heavy, and for those who already hold a negative idea of God as angry or judgemental, it could easily reinforce unhelpful views. So we should start by emphasising God's goodness. What does the beauty and diversity of creation tell us about God's nature? How does God's care for creation inspire us to trust him? Do you have an example of a time when you have learnt something new about God through the natural world?

- **While there is much that is good and beautiful about this world, there is also plenty of brokenness. Paul argues that God's wrath is being revealed against sin.**

Take some time to explain the idea of God's wrath, and how it's not wild and unhinged, but an extension of his love, rooted in his nature as the Creator who cares for this world, and is angry at the way we are destroying it.

#### 2 The truth about sin (Romans 1.18, 21–23)

- **Paul defines sin as idolatry – exchanging the glory of God for images and worshipping created things rather than the Creator.**

Take some time to unpack the concept of idolatry. It's easy to imagine that idolatry is just about worshipping statues and representations of gods – something few of us do today. But really it is about exchanging anything for God. What are the idols in our culture? Think about some that may be particularly pertinent for your congregation.

- **Idolatry is not a harmless thing; it has a negative effect on us. When we exchange truth for lies (verse 25) we become futile in our thinking and darkened in our hearts (verse 21), given over to our lusts.**

You may find it helpful to use the quotation from *This is Water* by David Foster Wallace, cited in on page 38 of *Romans: A Letter That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton, which illustrates how idols eat us alive.

God’s anger against humanity is motivated by his love. He hates to see us destroy ourselves, but he also doesn’t override our decisions. Instead, he gives us over to the consequences of our choices, in the hope that his kindness will lead us to repentance (Romans 2.4).

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**3 The truth about us (Romans 2.1-3; 3.23)**

- **Romans 1 addresses the idolatry of Gentiles, and you can imagine Jewish hearers thinking, ‘I’m glad that’s not true of me.’ But in Romans 2, Paul turns on his Jewish readers and tells them they are just as guilty!**

Why do we find it easier to identify sin in other people’s lives than in our own? Do you have an example of a time you have judged someone, only to realise you’ve been guilty of the very same thing? You may find it helpful to use the quotation from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, cited on page 45 of *Romans: A Letter That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton, and also to reflect on Jesus’ words in Matthew 7.1-5.

- **Paul offends every reader of this letter. He will not allow Gentiles to claim ignorance, since God has given them evidence of his divine nature through creation (Romans 1.19-20). And neither will he allow Jewish readers to judge Gentiles, while assuming they’re exempt. For all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory (Romans 3.23).**

This is a good opportunity to address everyone in the room, Christian or not. None of us is able to measure up, and all of us are in need of mercy. Non-Christians often believe that Christians judge them, with a ‘holier than thou’ attitude. So it will be important to show that the gospel confronts all of us equally. We are all in need of a saviour.

**CONCLUSION**    **How do we live in the light of this?**

Below are some suggested points of application. Feel free to select a couple of points which are most appropriate to your setting.

- Recognising the Creator through creation. What can you learn about the nature of God – his kindness, creativity, and care – by observing creation? Suggest that people spend time outdoors this week, reflecting on Psalm 8. This could be a great next step for those who aren't yet Christians but want to begin considering God.
- Truth and lies. What lies have you believed about God? Pray Psalm 139.23–24, asking God to search your heart and reveal any offensive ways within you. When you identify lies, seek out the truth in the Bible, and ask God to help you exchange the lie for the truth.
- Identifying idols. What are the potential idols in your life which are in danger of taking the place rightfully deserved by God? You might find it helpful to consider questions such as: What do I spend the most time thinking about? What do I invest in most, with my time, energy or money? What most distracts me from my devotion to God? What do I most fear losing?
- Consider whether you have a tendency to judge other people, rather than to identify your own sin. If appropriate, it may be worth reflecting on how your church fares collectively. Are there particular types of people towards whom you find it hard to be welcoming? Who would feel particularly judged if they were to walk into your church? What steps could you take to redress the balance?

**READING SUGGESTIONS:**

- *Romans: A Letter That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton
- *The Message of Romans* by John Stott
- *Romans 1–7 For You* by Timothy Keller
- *Counterfeit Gods* by Timothy Keller
- 'Slow to Anger' video by The Bible Project, and episodes 6 to 11 of 'The Character of God' series on The Bible Project podcast.

**WRITTEN PRAYER**

Lord Jesus, thank you that you are merciful and forgiving to your people, even though we have rebelled against you. We have turned away from you to try and rule over our own lives. Many times, we have made ourselves judge and ruler over others. Forgive us for condemning others silently or audibly, while ignoring our own prejudices, unhealthy attitudes and sinful behaviours. Lord, we have no hope, except for your love and forgiveness to heal and restore us. Forgive us Lord, and guide our words, thoughts and deeds today so that we may live in ways that honour you. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.