

Humanness Lost, Part 1

Romans 1:18-20

Call: Ps 19:1-4a (NIV)

Scripture: Col 1:15-17 (NIV)

I. Introduction

A. Introduction

We enter back into Romans this morning, a study I'm calling "*The Gospel For All Seasons.*" Or you could say, "*The Good News for All Seasons.*" Romans is essentially a book about good news. And, over the past three weeks, we've touched on much of this good news in Paul's introduction to the book. But, today, we get into the body of the letter which is going to bring about some bad news, which is the reason why we need the good news.

This week and next week go together, and I'm calling them "Humanness Lost." And, I want to set the stage for both weeks with a lengthy introduction this morning.

What does it mean to be human? How would you answer that question if someone were to ask you? You're a human being. I'm a human being. So, what does that mean?

- Are we simply accidents of nature, some sort of a random collection of atoms, as my science teacher told me?
- Or, are we simply individual, intellectual, thinking beings, as Des Cartes told us?
- Or, are we simply objects to produce things, as my boss told me?
- Or, are we made in the image of God, fearfully and wonderfully made, just a little bit lower than God, as my Sunday school teacher told me?

Or from another angle:

- As humans, why do we wonder at sunsets?
- Or why do we get sad so much?
- Or why do we feel like things have gone wrong with us?
- Or why can we love?

What are we, and why are we the way we are? What does it mean to be truly human?

B. Image of God

Well, I believe Scripture answers that question in its first few pages. In the beginning, the good and gracious creator God makes humanity in his image, in the imago dei. My Sunday School teacher was right. In other words, you and I, we are not accidents. Someone, besides our parents, wants us to exist, and that someone is the creator God, who is also lovingly pursuing us at all times and in all circumstances.

Now, there are many ways to look at what imago dei means, but essentially, I think of it as reflection, representation and responsibility.

- **Reflection:** To be made in the image of God is to reflect the creator. As his creation, we are to reflect His nature and character, primarily through love. God is love, so to reflect Him is to live in relationships of love.
- **Representation:** To be made in the image of God is to represent Him in this world. God puts His image-bearers all over the world, so people will look at us, see how we live and remember the living God.
- **Responsibility:** And, thirdly, to be made in the image of God is to have responsibility. There are ground rules to being human. I like to say that there are “manufacturer specifications” for being human. The creator God designed humanity to function a certain way. And, those specifications are found in His love letter to us called the Bible. The Bible defines how we function best in His creation.

As an analogy, I was mowing the grass with my new electric lawnmower not long ago. And, my daughter offered to mow for me, which was a miracle. So, we went outside to mow, but because it was new technology for me, I didn’t know how to start the mower. Luckily they gave me a picture of how to start it.

You extend the handle, push a button and hold the grip, and voila – it’s supposed to start. So, I extended the handle, held the grip, and pushed the button and it didn’t start. I looked at Sydney, then went back to holding the grip then pushing the button. It didn’t start. Sydney then looked at me and said, “Dad, maybe if you followed the directions by pushing the button, then holding the grip, it will start.” So, I did and it started. (I hate it when my children are smarter than me!)

The point is that I did not create the mower, so I didn’t know exactly how it worked. E-Go created the mower. And, because they created it, they knew how it worked and how it worked best. They wrote all the manufacturer specifications into a document for me to read, which I didn’t do.

God, our loving creator, has designed us to work a certain way, and has given us the Bible to explain how we work, and how we work best.

C. Dependence on God

Now, it just so happens that every specification, every command, God has given us in the Bible flow from one command and only one. Genesis 2 tells us that God, our loving creator, created Adam and Eve and placed them in a garden, then gave them one command, only one. What is the command?

It is this: *“...you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die”* (Gen 2:17). There is so much to say about this, but we don’t have time. Eat of every other tree in the garden – God is a generous God – except for this one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this one command, God is essentially saying this to the first humans, and by extension to all of humanity:

You are what you are because of me. You are a glorious creature, more magnificent than you will ever know. But, I have made you to be dependent on me for life. You are free, but you are designed to be a dependent being. Do not try to be your own god. For all of your magnificence, you cannot be your own god. You are a created being. You be you, and I will be me. If you try to be me, you will die. You will lose your life. if you try to live as an independent being, you will die.

That is what the first command to those first humans is saying. And, every other command in the Bible is but a variation of that first command. It's all about dependence on God for knowing good from evil, for knowing how to live life wisely on this planet. And, that one command is repeated to every image-bearer every moment of every day. Do not go after knowledge that will make you think you can live without the creator, or there will be consequences.

Notice God doesn't punish Adam and Eve. He doesn't have to. The natural consequences of independence from God is death. Just like in the physical world there are natural consequences. If you jump off a cliff, you will die. God's not punishing you. It's natural consequences. Same thing here. If you go the independent way, you will die. To sign our declaration of independence from God is to sign our own death certificate. Autonomy is a myth. Self-rule is a lie. "Live dependent on Me," God says. "That's how you are designed."

Furthermore, don't miss the love in this command. God tells us this because He wants us to truly live! He loves us so much, he tells us how to live! True life is found in radical dependence on Him.

D. The Bad News

We know that those first humans did not obey that command, which brought sin and death into the world. You talk about "*a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*" (the name of a children's book). That was it. They rebelled against their dependence and became less than human. And, if you follow Genesis for the next 11 chapters, you'll see a total descent into darkness, culminating in the Tower of Babel where humanity chooses to organize itself into a city without God. It's a massive declaration of independence.

Now here in Romans, beginning in our text today, Paul shows what the story of humanity's descent into darkness in Genesis actually looks like in 1st century Rome. And, it *is* really, really bad news.

If someone says to you, "I have good news and bad news for you. Which one do you want first?" Don't we typically say that we want the bad news first? This is exactly what Paul is doing. He'll share the bad news first, from here in chapter 1 to chapter 3 culminating in verse 3:23, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom 3:23). *All* have sinned, not some, not one or two. *All*. In this section of Romans, we find the universal sinfulness of God's image-bearers. The human race is in huge trouble, and we can't fix it on our own. It's much worse than we could ever imagine. It's really, really bad news, which is why we all need the Gospel.

E. These Two Romans Texts

Now, I know that these next two texts in Romans are especially sensitive texts. In fact, a preacher friend of mine even said he simply wouldn't preach these two texts in our cultural context right now. Some commentaries skip these passages entirely. But, here is where God has us right now at PBCC. So, what I desire to do over these two weeks is to share honestly where Paul is going in these texts, but also share as humbly and compassionately as I can. That's my goal.

F. Context

But, before we get there, let's set the context. Last week, we saw that Paul was "*obligated*" and "*eager*" to share the Gospel in Rome, and he was "*not ashamed of the Gospel.*" Paul is not ashamed to stand up for Jesus and the Jesus way of life. Paul sees that the Gospel is "*the power of God that brings salvation.*" As we said, the Gospel is dynamite, the Greek word behind the word "power." Dynamite is what is needed to bring real change to human hearts. After all, that's what happened to him. Paul, the former murderer of Christians, was met by Jesus on the Damascus road and the dynamite of the Gospel changed his heart.

We also saw that the Gospel is the revelation of the "*righteousness of God.*" Over the next two chapters, as Paul shares humanity's descent into darkness, we will get a sense for our need of the righteousness, or right-relatedness, that God freely offers, something we can't earn or attain ourselves.

But, *why* does this descent into darkness happen? That's what Paul first tackles in our text today. In next week's text, we will answer the *how* this descent into darkness happens. Today is the *why*. So, I invite you into our text today, Romans 1, beginning at verse 18.

II. The Knowledge of God Rejected (18-20)

18 [For] the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (NIV)

A. Introduction

In these three verses, Paul makes three key points about the revelation of the knowledge of God that will answer in detail the question of *why* the descent into darkness happens:

1. God's wrath is being revealed.
2. Humanity suppresses the knowledge of God.
3. Everyone in the world knows about God.

We will explore them in reverse order this morning.

B. Everyone knows about God

First of all, everyone in the world knows about God. Paul says that “*God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.*” From the indigenous groups deep in the Amazon rainforests to the aborigines in the Australian outback to everyone in the bay area, everyone knows something about God. God has hardwired himself into human existence, revealing himself to everyone by what he has made. This happens in two ways:

1. **Imago Dei:** First of all, he *has* made every single person in his image. According to scripture, every single person is royalty, created in the image of God, deserving utmost dignity and respect. Every person – every one of your family members, your classmates, your work colleagues, your teachers, even Dodgers fans – every single person has a tag on them that says, “Made by God in his image,” and deserves utmost dignity and respect. I think we all need to hear that in an election year. And, being made in his image inherently means there is some knowledge of God and his divine nature in them.
2. **Creation:** Secondly, God’s eternal power is clearly seen in creation. The power, immensity, beauty, wonder and order of creation are all clearly seen and lived by every person.

Of course, the Psalms speak to the wonder of creation, as we read in our Call to Worship today. Paul is making the point, as with the Psalmist, that the experience of the wonder of creation imparts in us a knowledge that there is a creator. Paul’s point is not so much to make a case for natural theology. His point is that if anyone seriously considered this world and took the time to really look at it, they would conclude that God is there. Of course, today, we know a little more than Paul about the physical world.

Consider the earth for a moment. As a best estimate, the earth weighs some six sextillion tons – that’s six followed by 21 zeros. And, yet, it is hanging in space, perfectly balanced, rotating on its axis at roughly 1,000 miles per hour. And, it is rotating around the sun at 19 miles/second or 1,140 miles per hour. And, we’re sitting here as if nothing is moving.

And consider the sun. Every square yard of the sun continually gives off 130,000 horse power of energy! That’s the energy equivalent of 450 V-8 engines – every square yard! And, there are millions of square yards on the sun.

All of that is amazing in and of itself, but it all needs to be put together just perfectly. So, consider the moon, and the eclipse we just had. Scientists tell us that the moon is exactly the right size and gets positioned so precisely between the earth and the sun, that total eclipses are perfect. Astronomers will say that there are 295 moons in the solar system, yet ours is the only moon with the exact size and distance to produce those perfect solar eclipses. Extraordinary.

Consider also the given laws of nature. The laws of nature require every “knob” to be at a particular setting. For example, gravity. I’m told it is a very weak force, one of the weakest. That’s probably not what’s going through your mind when you’re falling from that cliff. But, if you turn up the knob of gravity ever so slightly, life cannot work here. If you turn it down ever so slightly, life cannot work here. And, I’m told you can do this with all the “knobs” of the universe, and life simply cannot work here.

But, there’s more! the immensity and power and beauty and wonder of the universe is staggering enough, but consider also the ordering. Our world is not only finely tuned, it is finely ordered. There is amazing regularity to creation. This is why math works! One physics professor once said, “If your math equations aren’t beautiful, then they’re probably wrong.” If your math equations are ugly, they’re probably wrong! That’s a remarkable property of our world! Math is so effective, because our world has not only been finely tuned, but also finely ordered.

(As an aside, if our physical world is ordered, don’t you think that our moral and spiritual worlds should be as well?)

We live in a very delicately, finely tuned, finely ordered universe. Some scientists think we could simply go down to CVS and pick up any old universe like ours, that universes just come together by themselves.

Think about that statement, that universes can just come together by themselves. Now pull out your cell phone. We walk around with these things every day, and who in their right mind would look at one of these and think that everything just came together by itself? Something this finely tuned had to have a maker! And the universe is infinitely, infinitely, infinitely more complex and more interconnected than the cell phone. And, we could actually think that there is no creator that made it that way?

Our world is full of power, immensity, beauty, wonder and order, which reveals the power and nature of the living God. Every single person who has ever lived has been confronted with that truth. No person can claim ignorance. No person can say they didn’t know any better. *“People are without excuse”* (Rom 1:20). *“God’s invisible qualities have been clearly seen”* by everyone.

And, yet, as Paul says, *“Humanity has suppressed that knowledge,”* the second point Paul makes here.

C. Humanity’s suppression

Verse 18, Paul says all people suppress or stifle the truth of God by their *“wickedness,”* literally by their *“unrighteousness.”* Do you see the word play here: The Gospel reveals God’s *“righteousness,”* verse 17 from last week, in the midst of our current *“unrighteousness,”* our wickedness.

But Paul says, and will continue to say, that the suppression problem is not intellectual, it's moral. We can be very good at constructing intellectual arguments against God, but the core issue is not intellectual. The core issue is that we want to call the shots. We want to be our own gods. We want independence, just like Adam and Eve in the garden.

One of the scariest things I've heard in our world today is this, *"No one is gonna tell me how to live my life."* That is a scary statement when that no one includes the creator of the universe! When we sign our declaration of independence, we sign our death certificate.

And what is the ultimate consequence of people suppressing the truth of God? Verse 18, *"The wrath of God is being revealed"* (Rom 1:18).

D. God's wrath

So, what is the wrath of God and when is it happening?

- 1. What is God's wrath?** I think it's important to see that the wrath of God here in verse 18 is parallel to the righteousness of God in verse 17. In fact, the NIV somehow doesn't translate the very important connector *"for"*, which would help us see that *"the wrath of God"* is actually a manifestation of *"the righteousness of God."* You could actually rewrite verse 18 to say, "In speaking of God's righteousness, we cannot forget about God's righteous judgment against evil, *the wrath of God*" (1:18).

God's wrath is righteous judgment or righteous anger. JI Packer says, "[But] God's wrath is not the capricious, arbitrary, bad-tempered and conceited anger which pagans attribute to their gods. It's not the sinful, resentful, malicious, infantile anger which we find among humans. It's a function of God's holiness" (Packer, 184). The living God is holy. The living God is not morally neutral or morally relativistic. He is altogether holy. As one writer says, "The God that comes to us in Jesus is not 'a sweet-smiling cosmic guru, sitting in a bed of delicate roses, oblivious to the sin of the world and its ruin upon the world'" (Johnson). That kind of God would be powerless against godlessness and wickedness. No, the living God is altogether holy. He is entirely just, entirely righteous, entirely fair, entirely pure, entirely whole, entirely other. And his holiness naturally recoils against all that distorts his design for his image-bearers and for this planet. God abhors evil! Which is good news for us! It means we matter to him! And what we do matters to Him! If God was no longer angry with our sin and our suppression of truth, it would mean he doesn't care. But, he does care, which is why he has given us his "manufacturer specifications" for how to function best in this world.

- 2. When is God's wrath happening?** For Paul, God's wrath is usually reserved for judgment day, but here, he says it's currently being revealed from heaven. Just like humanity *"suppressing of the truth"* is in the present tense, so the wrath of God *"being revealed"* is also in the present tense. This means that as we suppress the truth presently, so God's wrath is being revealed presently.

E. Transition

That's our text for today. That's the *why* of humanity's descent into darkness. As I said, next week, we'll see the *how* God's wrath typically plays out.

But, what do we learn today, what are the implications of these three verses for us today? I have four from this text:

III. Implications

A. The Great Wonder

This text should cause us to wonder at God's creation. As Andy Crouch says, "Wonder comes from opening our eyes wider, not from bringing the screen closer" (Crouch, 13). The physical world is good, not only because our good God made it, but also because it reveals Him as creator. It reveals his creativity, his power, his immensity and his orderliness. This week take a walk in creation and wonder at it.

B. The Great Warning

We must keep asking ourselves whether we are suppressing any truth. This takes great wisdom and great discernment on our part. And, it always helps to live within an authentic community. This is what our connection groups are for – to help us navigate this world together and help each other discern whether we are suppressing the truth in our lives. We all live with blind spots, don't we? Our faith community can help us with those blind spots.

C. The Great Hope

God's wrath is actually where our hope is grounded. The wrath of God is not something people like to talk about in church. However, in a world where evil has run amok, God's wrath is good news. When we read the news and hear about all the evil – from the trafficking of young girls, to the wars where insecure tyrants choose to destroy countries and peoples, to the school shootings all too common in our country – it is good news that God is not neutral toward evil. He will do something about all of it at some point. This is our great hope.

D. Our Great Response (of Dependence)

And, lastly, our great God has made himself known in creation in a very specific way. He has sent His Son, Jesus, to reveal himself perfectly. But Jesus is not only the perfect revelation of who God is, He's also the perfect revelation of who we were created to be. Jesus is the true human. He shows us true humanness.

And, what was Jesus most known for? Radical dependence on His Father demonstrated through a life of prayer. Jesus is the preeminent human pray-er. His disciples are recorded to have asked Jesus to only teach them one thing. Only one thing. "*Lord, teach us to pray*" (Luke 11:1). Why? Because they realize that everything Jesus says and does flows out of His dependent relationship with His Father which is grounded in dependent prayer. Jesus, the true human, is radically dependent on His Father. So, what does it mean to be truly human for us? It's to look like Jesus by living in radical dependence on the Father demonstrated through

prayer. That is to say that we are most human when we pray. When we stop praying, we stop depending. Prayer shows our radical dependence on God.

IV. Conclusion

For you are a glorious creature, more magnificent than you will ever know. But, God has made you to be dependent on Him for life. You are free, but you are designed to be a dependent being. Do not try to be your own god. For all of your magnificence, you cannot be your own god. Live in radical dependence on Him. This is how you will function best with your one and only beautiful life in this remarkable world.

Amen.

Benediction

For you are God's magnificent image-bearer, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that you should walk in them. Go now in radical dependence on Him so you can indeed walk in them. (Adapted from Eph 2:10)

Resources

Bird, Michael, *Romans (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 6)*

Crouch, Andy, *Tech-wise Family*

Gorman, Michael J, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell W. *Regent MP3 3690H*

Packer, JI, *Knowing God*

Stott, John, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*

Thielman, Frank, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*