



# MAN'S DESCENT AND GOD'S WRATH

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Romans 1:18-32

Third Message

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One of my favorite Peanuts cartoons has Charlie Brown walking along the street rewinding his kite string and following the string to his downed kite. As he goes he is waxing expert to his friend and nemesis, Lucy. He explains: "In kite flying the ratio of weight to sail-area is very important. This ratio is known as 'Sail Loading,' and it is measured in ounces per square foot. For example, a three-foot kite with a sail area of four and one-half square feet should weigh about two or three ounces." Lucy observes, "You know a lot about kites, don't you, Charlie Brown?" He replies, "Yes, I think I can say that I do." By this time the string has led them to the mouth of a storm drain—where the string disappears. In the last frame, Lucy asks, "Charlie Brown, if you know so much about flying kites...why is yours down the sewer?"

We like to think we're doing well even though we know we're not. John Stott makes the following statement:

What keeps people away from Christ more than anything else is their inability to see their own need for him or their unwillingness to admit it. Jesus himself put it this way: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). We only go to a doctor when we admit that we are ill and we can't cure ourselves. In the same way, we only go to Christ when we admit we are guilty sinners and we realize that we can't save ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

If we deny that we have a problem, there is no help for us. Alcoholics Anonymous understands this principle very well. That is why the first step in their 12-step program is: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." Those of us who are Christians could make the same statement about our sin: We admitted that we were powerless over sin and that our lives had become unmanageable. Someone has well said, "a man's greatest need is to know what is his greatest need."

We have already seen that the message of the book of Romans is the proclamation of the good news of the salvation that God has provided. But, before the apostle Paul lays out the good news, he spends the opening chapters relating some decidedly bad news.

If someone says to us, "I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" almost invariably we reply, "The bad news." That is what

Paul is doing here in the opening chapter of Romans. We have some bad news to face before he can share the good news with us. And the bad news is that the human race is in big trouble. The situation is critical. The crisis is real. Paul will spend two and a half chapters making his point. He will conclude, in chapter 3, by showing that we have all sinned. Right across the board, every one of us has gone astray and established our unrighteousness before God. We need help, and that help is found in the salvation that God offers.

But first, the bad news. Here is what Paul has to say. Romans 1:18-20:

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 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.**

In these verses the apostle makes three important declarations concerning God's self-revelation. I think it will make more sense if we take them in reverse order. Paul's first declaration is this: *Everyone in the world knows about God.* From the Aborigine in the Australian outback to the person in the deepest, darkest part of Africa, everybody knows about God, because the invisible God has made himself manifest through his creation. Creation is God's first missionary. No one was missing when the knowledge about God was passed out.

The Old Testament agrees with the apostle. Listen to the words of David, from Psalm 19:

**The heavens are telling of the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
And night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
Their voice is not heard.  
Their call has gone out through all the earth,  
And their utterances to the end of the world (1-4).**

To the question, Is there a God? nature answers with a resounding, Yes! Every star proclaims it. Every leaf reminds us of it. The glaciers are megaphones. Nature is a song with many parts, but its common theme and verse is that God exists. Creation is God's first missionary.

A number of years ago, I read the fascinating book, *Life And Death In Shanghai*, by Nien Cheng. The book is a marvelous testimony of courage. After the communists overthrew Chiang Kai Chek, in 1949, Nien and her husband decided to stay in Shanghai, where he was a general manager for Shell Oil Company, which was the only multi-national company that chose to remain. When her husband died in 1957, Shell hired her as a special advisor. In 1966, Mao Tse Tung launched his proletarian revolution, and Nien was arrested. She was beaten and taken to prison, where she remained in solitary confinement for six years.

One account in this woman's book parallels what Paul is saying here in Romans. In her second or third year of imprisonment, a spider crawled into her cell one day and began to climb up one of the bars. She writes:

I watched it climb steadily up the iron bar, and it was such a long walk for this tiny little creature. When it reached the top, it swung out and descended on a silken thread spun from its body. After it secured its thread to the other end of the bar, it crawled back to where it had started and swung out in a new direction. I was fascinated by the fact that this spider knew exactly what to do and where to take the next thread, without any hesitation or mistakes. The spider knew its job. When it had made the frame, it proceeded to make a web that was intricate and absolutely perfect, with all the strands evenly spaced. As I watched this architectural feat, I was flooded with questions: "Who had taught that little spider to make the web? Could it really have acquired that skill through evolution? Or did God make that spider and endow it with the ability to make a web so that it could catch food and perpetuate its species?"<sup>2</sup>

The spider helped her to see that God was in control. From then on, Mao Tse Tung and his revolutionaries seemed much less menacing. She says, "I felt a renewal and a hope surge inside of me."

This what theologians call "general revelation" as distinct from special revelation, the revelation of Scripture, which tells us a lot more about God. But general revelation tells us a few things about God.

The argument from the created order in the world is overwhelming. In his book, *Romans, Righteousness From Heaven*, Kent Hughes writes:

If I were to number ten pennies from 1 to 10 and put them in my pocket and then put my hand back in my pocket, the chances of my drawing out the number 1 penny would be 1 in 10. If I put the number 1 penny back in my pocket and mixed the pennies up again, the chances of drawing out penny number 2 would be one in a hundred. The chances of repeating the same procedure with penny number 3 would be one in a thousand. To do so with all of them (1 through 10, in order) would be one in ten billion! Noting the order and design of our universe, Kepler, the founder of modern astronomy, discoverer of "Three Planetary

Laws of Motion," and originator of the term "satellite," said, "The undevout astronomer is mad."<sup>3</sup>

Paul's second declaration is this: *Mankind suppresses this knowledge*. We "suppress the truth in unrighteousness," says the apostle. The NIV translates it this way, "we suppress the truth by our wickedness." The problem is not intellectual, but moral. We are very good at constructing intellectual arguments against God, but the core issue is accountability. We don't want to be accountable to anyone. We want to run our own lives, to call the shots and be in charge. It has nothing to do with the intellect.

It is easy to be intimidated by someone's intellectual arguments against the existence of God. Many who take this position are sharp and their arguments fairly weighty. But after a while you begin to see that though their debating points are skillful, and they are good at steering the conversation away from the existence of God, when you get down to the central issues they don't want God in their lives. Intellectual arguments are nothing more than an attempt to keep God at arm's length. So man is without excuse. If we were made to stand before God today, we would admit that we knew he existed.

As a consequence of man's rejection of God and man's suppression of the truth, Paul's third declaration is this: *God's wrath is revealed against the sin of man*. The term, "wrath of God," does not imply that God is an arbitrary, capricious being who loses his temper whenever his rules are broken and tries to get even with the transgressor. Rather, the term implies an orderly God who has created an orderly world. The tides come in and go out. We can calculate the precise moment when the sun rises and sets. We know that if we step off a 20-story building, we will fall. We live in an orderly world.

And not only is the universe orderly in the physical sense, it has moral and spiritual order as well, so that God's wrath against evil is built into its very structure. Notice Paul says that the wrath of God is *now* being revealed. He is not talking about the wrath of God which will be revealed at the Second Coming but, rather, the wrath that is being expressed or revealed from heaven right now. This is the law of inevitable consequences: we reap what we sow. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, "God gives us that terrible freedom we have longed for."

Richard Halverson put it this way in his book, *The Gospel for the Whole of Life*: "This isn't speaking of a careless casting aside of someone who is loved, but God's reluctant capitulation to man's freedom which he himself guaranteed in creation." If you have a NASB or KJV, you will notice as we read on in this passage that Paul uses the phrase, "He gave them over," three times. That is the wrath of God. He lets us have what we want. That is when we proceed to trash our lives. If we want to live that way, God will not stop us. That is when life becomes dull, grim, meaningless and dead, as the Bible describes life lived apart from God.

What is the nature of this wrath? And what are the consequences of rejecting God? Verses 21-23:

**For 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. 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.**

We are like spoiled children, refusing to give thanks for what we receive. God gives us so many good gifts—love, laughter, children, health and beauty—but we don't even give him the time of day. Instead, we think of ourselves as self-made men and women. When we act that way we become intellectually confused and morally darkened. We tune into the talk shows to learn how to live, looking to talk show hosts for ethical and moral guidance. We don't know right from wrong or up from down. We are befuddled in our thinking. We claim to be wise, but we have become fools. We take leave of our senses and no longer know where reality lies.

And we become idolaters. That is the consequence of rejecting God—always. It leads to idolatry, because man is incurably religious. If he will not worship the true God, he must find a substitute. He must have some kind of God, so he becomes like the god he worships. Notice the progressive degeneration that results from idolatry. First, man worshipped an image of a man, then birds, then quadrupeds, and ultimately reptiles, crawling things. He couldn't go any lower. He exchanged the invisible God for an image of insects. Paul is saying that when we degrade God, we end up degrading ourselves, worshipping insects, snakes, and people. That is what humanism is—another form of idolatry. It is worshipping man instead of God. Martin Luther said, "Whatever your heart clings to and relies on is your god."

So man refused to worship God for who he is and instead reduced him to his own level through idolatry. We shake our heads at the superstitions and idolatry of the Eastern world, but the cultural idolatry of the West is no better. Exchanging worship of the living God for an obsession with wealth, power and fame is equally foolish.

Paul goes on to describe the result of all this. Verses 24-25:

**Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.**

We ought to be praising the Creator, but instead we end up praising the creation. That is why people refer to "Mother Nature." We praise the creation as though it

were self-perpetuating and self-propagating. Now we can have debates over the age of the earth and change among species, but the Bible emphatically declares that God created the heavens and the earth. That is the beginning. Evolution doesn't have a beginning. Evolutionists obscure the very notion of a beginning by pushing everything back, the idea being that if a sufficiently long period of time elapses, anything can happen. That is like saying that if a number of monkeys were to be seated behind a bank of typewriters, given enough time they will type one of Shakespeare's sonnets. But evolutionists do not answer the question of ultimate origin. No matter how far back the dates are pushed, the question remains: Where did the heavens and the earth come from in the first place? They can't answer that, because man has "worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."

And the descent continues. Verses 26-27:

**For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 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.**

I appreciate David Roper's wise words on this issue:

These are very difficult verses. Let me say first that we need to have compassion for those who are in the homosexual community. When we see gay parades and marches, it ought not make us angry, it ought to break our hearts, because we know the pain and loneliness inside their hearts. But what we need to know from this passage is that Gay is not good. Homosexuality is a sin. Period. We need not to be confused about that. We constantly debate: Is it right, or is it wrong? Is homosexuality sin or is it a sickness? Is it something genetic, or is it something environmental? Paul takes out all that confusion and says it is sin. It is not the worst sin in the world, but it is one of the most undignified things you can do to your body.<sup>4</sup>

Paul does not think homosexual activity is natural. He calls it unnatural, a perversion. That is what that word "error" means. And there are consequences for this error. At the heart of the homosexual condition lies a longing for love. Homosexuals want to be accepted, to be complete, just like everyone else. But we do not help homosexuals by condoning their behavior. There is only one way out of this or any other sin, and that is through repentance.

About this point many start to feel a little self-righteous. But Paul goes on. Verses 28-32:

**And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, mal-**

**ice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 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.**

I don't know about you, but I find myself included here. This list of 21 vices is hard to classify. John Stott offers the following helpful divisions:

It begins with four general sins in which people *have become filled*, namely *every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity*. Then come five more sins which they are *full of* and which all depict broken human relationships: *envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice* (29). Next come a couple on their own, which seem to refer to libel and slander ...These two are followed by four which...portray...extreme forms of pride: *God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful*. Now comes another independent couple of words, denoting people who are "inventive" in relation to evil and rebellious in relation to parents (30). And the list ends with four negatives, *senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless* (31), which [the Jerusalem Bible] rather neatly renders "without brains, honour, love, or pity."<sup>5</sup>

What the apostle is picturing here is a society gone astray, because it has abandoned worship and love of God. We do the things we shouldn't do even though we know they are wrong. We see the wrath of God revealed in these verses as man is left to himself, with no restraints and no inhibitions, an existence that leads only to increasingly monotonous and unending boredom and frustration.

And people not only continue to practice these wrongful things, they actively encourage others to do the same. If you don't believe that, turn on your favorite television talk show any day of the week and you will see studio audiences clapping and cheering wildly as they watch violence, deceit and destruction portrayed before their eyes. "...*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.*"

The wrath of God is a terrible thing, but the grace of God is very sweet. That grace is available to all today, free of cost, whenever we are ready to repent.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 67.

<sup>2</sup> Nien Cheng, *Life And Death In Shanghai* (Penguin, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Kent Hughes, *Romans, Righteousness From Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) 34.

<sup>4</sup> David Roper, "The Descent of Man" (Cole Community Church, Boise ID, 9/27/1987).

<sup>5</sup> Stott, *Romans*, 79.