

Romans 1:18-32, The Gravity of the Fall, 10/20/19

During the first 100 years of Harvard Law School 1st year law students were required to analyze Romans as part of their curriculum because of the careful way Paul builds his gospel argument. And the book argues Paul's thesis: In the gospel of Jesus we receive the righteousness of God. This first question he answers is "Why do I need to receive righteousness from God?" Why is there a problem? From 1:18-3:20 Paul answers this question, which we are calling part 1 of this Romans series, the Problem. In doing so he presents a dark picture of humanity. But it is the backdrop of the bright jewel of the gospel. While we believe all Scripture is equally true and all Scripture is equally authoritative, but not all scripture is equally packed. This passage we are looking at today from Romans 1:18-32 is packed, in fact more than we can unpack today but we will do our best.

Good theology shows up in some of the most surprising places...take for instance the Rock Band, Aerosmith. Now some younger people are saying "Isn't that the guy from American Idol?" Yes... now they may look like a bunch of older guys trying too hard, but look how cool they used to look back then! Good theology shows up in surprising places because- In 1993 #1 hit, Livin' on the Edge. Listen...

"There's somethin' wrong with the world today, I don't know what it is, Something's wrong with our eyes, We're seein' things in a different way, And God knows it ain't his, It sure ain't no surprise, We're livin' on the edge, You can't help yourself from falling."

Aerosmith is absolutely right. Something is wrong, we aren't seeing things as God sees them, we can't help ourselves from falling. And if Aerosmith read Romans 1, they would know what that something is. Today we are going to look at why Humanity Can't Help Itself from Falling in a message I'm calling The Gravity of the Fall. Why, with greater technology and advancement in education and science and passing of new policies, we are constantly at each other's throats and the world always seems to be on livin' on the edge of destruction. Why humanity at every turn, seems to take good, glorious and beautiful things, and weaponize them for our own selfish desires.

Reason #1 We exchange the truth about God for a lie.

Romans 1:18-21

¹⁸ 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. ²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Now before we go any further we need to understand what Paul means by the wrath of God. Wrath is God's settled, fair and righteous disposition toward sinful humanity. God's wrath is not

like the child having a tantrum in the Acme aisle knocking over the cereal boxes. God's wrath is more like the disposition of the parent of that child in the Acme. We think thunderbolts...but that is not the word here. Righteous anger would be a better synonym. That's a fairly unpopular idea to modern ears isn't it? Wrath of God? We would rather think of God not as the God described in the Bible, but a God of our own creation...as C.S. Lewis described. "What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, 'What does it matter so long as they are contented?' We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves' and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all'.

And this is precisely the problem. Humanity rejects the God who is. Humanity has suppressed THE TRUTH about God and exchanged it for a lie. Suppression carries the idea of holding something down. Suppression is not the same as ignorance. Suppression means the truth is there but you keep yourself from acknowledging it. Like a beach ball you are trying to hold under the water: it keeps trying to come to the surface and you keep pushing it down. The problem is not knowledge but suppression of knowledge. God has revealed himself plainly in what he has made. Now, I am tempted here to walk through all the evidences of God, but I did that in our Spring series "Skeptical" Go back and watch that. So I will just hit this briefly. Paul points to two evidences of God in creation his eternal power and divine nature. Eternal power—How do we account for the sheer beauty and magnitude of creation? As David said in Psalm 19 "The heavens declare the glory of God." I'm no math wiz...but Nothing X Nobody can't equal everything. How do we account for life, but also How do we account for the complexity of life its intricate design if not for the eternal power of the creator?

Francis Collins, head of the human genome project, says "How could a cosmic accident ever result in something of this digital elegance of a DNA strand? It's like thinking an explosion in an ink factory could inadvertently produce the collected works of Shakespeare."

Not just the eternal power but creation reveals God's divine nature. Divine morality is imprinted on the human heart. It is why we know instinctively right from wrong. There are things in our hearts that tell us we are more than just accidental biology-- Like our longings for love and meaning and sense of eternity in our souls when we hear a beautiful piece of music that seems to transcend the material world. Back in 2009, the famed British journalist and biographer, A.N. Wilson, former atheist, made quite a sensation when he declared himself a Christian, said, "In the Western world we've been told that only stupid people believe in Christianity. But as a matter of fact, it's atheism that is a dry, lifeless creed and totally irrational. Atheism says that we're just a collection of chemicals. It has no answer whatsoever to the question of how this animated sack of accidental chemicals could be capable of love or heroism or poetry."

We know this is true internally and we know we are utterly dependent and completely accountable to this creator. And it reveals that there is a wide gap between us and this creator

that we cannot cross without Him. We are without excuse for our suppression. [Next Slide] And yet humanity doesn't want this God. We don't want to be accountable and dependent. We want a God that we can control. It is the phenomenon of "We know, but we don't know."

Near the end of WWII, the first town with a concentration camp that the Allied forces liberated was a town called Ohrdruf, Germany. American GI's witnessed hundreds of dead bodies. General Patton brought the mayor of Ohrdruf and his wife to see for themselves what they had to have known what was happening in their town. He ordered the mayor and every able body in the town to dig graves for each body. After they dug the graves and conducted a funeral for the deceased, Patton found out that the mayor and his wife hung themselves. Before their death, they left a note that read, "*We didn't know... but we knew.*"

Story of man at Starbucks. Sometimes we will be accused of being repressed as Christians. Not able to open arms up to the world and all the indulgences that it offers, living free from moral restrictions of God. But what Paul says is that those who are truly repressed, who are darkened in their understanding are those who hold down the truth that there's a creator to whom we are accountable. And as long as we suppress that truth we will never understand who we are or why the world is as it is. Like a man arguing that air doesn't exist, all the while breathing it in. If we are going to be truly living in reality, if we will have true freedom, we must acknowledge the creator's right to be ruler. And this leads us to our second reason we can't help ourselves from falling.

Reason #2 We Exchange worship of God for worship of idols.

Romans 1:22-23, 25-26

²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

What happens when people suppress the truth of God and don't depend on him? It's not that they stopped worshipping, they simply exchange the object of their worship. Whatever that thing is becomes our bottom line, the thing we cannot live without, defining and validating everything we do.

David Foster Wallace- One of most significant influencers of postmodern thought.

"In the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some a god is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you."

Our hearts are idol factories. They were made to worship. And the thing that we worship is the thing that we will obey because it controls what we desire. Exchange of truth leads us to an exchange of worship which inevitably leads us to:

Reason #3 We exchange obedience to God for obedience to our desires.

Romans 1:24, 26-32

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.

²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Wow. Not a glowing recommendation of humanity's resumé is it? I want to make a 3 observations from this section. 1st, Notice how God's wrath is observed v.18....not immediate annihilation and thunderbolts is it? Instead it is the quiet, invisible work of letting people have what they want. 3x in this section Paul says, **God gave them over**. God is a gentleman; he will not force us into worship. Parable of the prodigal son...gave what he wanted. 2nd observation- Part of the giving over process is allowing us to pursue disobedience to our own heart's desire...here's the Greek word used in verse 24, 25- **Epithumia**, if you have been a part of Brandywine for some time, you have heard this word. It means "Over-desires". All controlling drives and longings. The main problem of our heart is not so much desires for bad things but are over-desires for good things. We take good things love, family, relationships, jobs, sex, food, fitness, security...and make them into god things, ultimate things.

3rd observation- pursuing our idols will not free us, rather they will enslave us. they control us, corrupt us, they make us less human the more we get them. The worst thing that can happened us is what when we are given our idols, our over-desires. Oscar Wilde summed it up well, "when the gods wish to punish us the answer our prayers."

This is not an exhaustive list of the out workings of God giving us over to our over-desires, but it is a wide-ranging list of the disorder and dysfunction of idolatry. Paul first addresses **sexual disorder** -infidelity, promiscuity, and homosexuality. While these are sinful desires of the heart, they are on equal footing with the rest of the list, so we can't isolate above others. But this is obviously the most debated and dividing issue within the church today, so we need to be informed of what Scripture says and how to discuss this with grace and truth. **Skeptical Series**. But Paul continues with his list of disordered over-desires- **economic disorder**- greed and envy, **social disorder**- murder, strife, deceit, malice, inventors of evil, applauding the evil of others. **Relational disorder**- they disobey their parents, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

And here's the thing: We don't always get to choose how God's giving over process affects us. In some people, corruption manifests itself in disordered sexual desires whether heterosexual, homosexual, toward envy, pride, unbridled personal ambitions, an out-of-control temper; maybe an inability to control your impulses for food; a propensity toward doubt, worry or depression.

Apart from the Holy Spirit, we are all addicted, all dysfunctional, all disordered in our worship. God will let us pursue what we want to worship, what we will obey. In fact, God's wrath finds its ultimate judgment giving us over to continue to pursue life without him for eternity, where the fullness of dysfunctional worship, apart from the grace of God, will be manifested in a place called Hell.

Why can't humanity help themselves from falling? Exchange Truth, exchange worship, exchange obedience. We may say, why would God be so passive? Why would he just let us go and give us over to these things? Part of the answer is the gospel. Because God did do something about it. Remarkably the same Greek word "give over" is the same word used of what Jesus did for us.

Matthew 20:17-19

¹⁷ Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, ¹⁸ "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

Although we did not want God and he won't force himself on us, He demonstrates his great love, his pursuit of us but giving himself over for us. We exchanged worship of God for worship of idols, but He exchanged his life to have us. **Only the gospel has the power to break the fall.**

[Next Slide] Paul has referred to gentile society throughout this section. And he is well aware that the religious Jews will hear these words and whole-heartedly agree, hi-five! "You're absolutely right Paul these irreligious people deserve God's wrath and anger. I'm so glad I'm not like them." Maybe you felt that way....I think these verses are in part meant to draw out any self-righteousness in us because as we will see Paul will next turn to confront the hypocrisy of the religious, moral man.