

(((PREACHING *the* WORD)))

ROMANS

RIGHTEOUSNESS
from **HEAVEN**



R. KENT HUGHES

Romans

Copyright © 1991 by R. Kent Hughes

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Jon McGrath, Simplicated Studio

Cover image: Adam Greene, illustrator

First printing 1991

First printing redesign 2013

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. 2011 Text Edition. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from *The New American Standard Bible*®. Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-3615-1

ISBN-10: 978-1-4335-3615-3

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3616-8

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3617-5

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3618-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hughes, R. Kent.

Romans : righteousness from heaven / R. Kent Hughes

p. cm.—(Preaching the word)

ISBN 13: 1-4335-3615-1

ISBN 10: 1-4335-3615-3

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

1. Bible. N.T. Romans—Commentaries. 2. Bible. N.T. Romans—Meditations. I. Title. II. Title: Romans, righteousness from heaven. III. Series: Huges, R. Kent. Preaching the word.

BS2665.3H78 1991

227107—dc20

90-49412

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

TS 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	9
<i>A Word to Those Who Preach the Word</i>	11
1 Introducing Paul to Rome (1:1–7)	15
2 Paul’s Motivation for Ministry (1:8–17)	23
3 Understanding Unbelief, I (1:18–25)	31
4 Understanding Unbelief, II (1:24–32)	39
5 God’s Perfect Judgment (2:1–16)	49
6 The Heart of the Matter (2:17–29)	57
7 The Religious Advantage (3:1–20)	67
8 The Miracle of Righteousness (3:21–31)	75
9 <i>Sola Fide</i> (4:1–16)	83
10 The Faith of Abraham (4:17–25)	91
11 Justification—Exultation (5:1–11)	99
12 Grace Abounding (5:12–21)	107
13 Freedom from Sin (6:1–14)	115
14 Freedom in Slavery (6:15–23)	123
15 Freedom in Christ (7:1–25)	131
16 Liberation by the Spirit (8:1–17)	141
17 Three Groans and One Glory (8:18–27)	151
18 Super Conquerors (8:28–39)	159
19 Sovereign Election (9:1–33)	167
20 God’s Sovereignty—Man’s Responsibility (10:1–21)	177
21 Israel’s Future (11:1–32)	185
22 From Theology to Doxology (11:33–36)	197
23 Elements of Commitment (12:1, 2)	205
24 Renewed Thinking (12:3–8)	213
25 Love in Action (12:9–21)	221

26	Heaven's Citizens and Human Government (13:1–7)	231
27	Loving on the Level (13:8–14)	241
28	Unity and Diversity, I (14:1–12)	249
29	Unity and Diversity, II (14:13–23)	259
30	Christ Our Example (15:1–13)	267
31	Paul's Missionary Heart, I (15:14–33)	277
32	Paul's Missionary Heart, II (16:1–23)	285
33	The End Is Praise (16:25–27)	293
	<i>Notes</i>	301
	<i>Scripture Index</i>	311
	<i>General Index</i>	317
	<i>Index of Sermon Illustrations</i>	323

A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never *perfectly* embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s ethos backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but *he does*.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you *preach the Word* may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

ROMANS 1:1-7

1

Introducing Paul to Rome



NO REASONABLE PERSON would dispute that the book of Romans is one of the most powerful and influential books ever written. The epistle of Paul to the Romans has been the written force behind some of the most significant conversions of church history. St. Augustine, the most brilliant theologian of the early centuries, came to conviction of sin and salvation after reading some verses from the thirteenth chapter. Martin Luther recovered the doctrine of salvation by faith from his study of Romans 1:17 and went on to lead the Protestant Reformation. While listening to the reading of Luther's preface to the book of Romans, John Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed" in conversion and became the catalyst of the great evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. John Bunyan was so inspired as he studied the great themes of Romans in the Bedford jail that he wrote the immortal *Pilgrim's Progress*. In our own time, while we may not always agree with his theology, Karl Barth's arguments from the book of Romans devastated liberal Christianity.

There is no doubt about the power of the book of Romans. The study of it produces genuine excitement and genuine trepidation—excitement because of the possibilities the life-changing themes of Romans bring to us, and trepidation at reasonably expounding their massiveness. I would invite each reader to offer the following prayer as we begin the study of this great book.

Father, I know that a humble spirit is indispensable to learning. And I pray that as I now consider the themes of Romans—so great, so history-changing, and sometimes so familiar—that through the study of them you will give me

16 ROMANS

a spirit of humility, that I will be constantly learning even from the familiar. I pray that the power that was exhibited in the lives of Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and so many others—that power which comes from understanding the fundamental doctrines of the faith and appropriating them in life—will be seen in me. Give me a continued spirit of humility. May I continue in prayer throughout this study. May your blessing rest upon my life. I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Paul begins his letter with an introduction that is longer than usual. It is also more theological and personal than any of his other epistles' introductions. The apostle is tremendously concerned that the Roman people receive what he has to say—that they not “turn him off” before they have read his arguments. Thus, he reveals himself and his theology, hoping that if they understand something of who he is and what he believes, they will give him a hearing.

The importance of this for us comes from the well-known fact that how a person perceives himself determines largely how he or she will act. A healthy self-perception tends to produce a healthy approach to life. I recently read of a second-grader in Tennessee who submitted an essay entitled “My Face” to his teacher. It read: “My face has two brown eyes. It has a nose and two cheeks. And two ears and a mouth. I like my face. I'm glad my face is just like it is. It is not bad, it is not good, but just right.” That is terrific! Now Paul introduces us to his own healthy, dynamic life view that, if appropriated, can produce power in us. As we go through his introduction in verses 1–7, we are going to see:

- Paul's view of himself (v. 1)
- Paul's view of preaching (vv. 2–4)
- Paul's view of his commission (v. 5)
- Paul's view of the Roman believers (and us) (vv. 6, 7)

Paul's introduction introduces us to deeper and more productive levels of spiritual life.

Paul's View of Himself (v. 1)

First, in verse 1 Paul describes himself as “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.” In just one sentence he capsulizes his self-perception to his Roman hearers. That he introduces himself as a “servant” (*doulos*) is very significant. He could have introduced himself as “Paul, an eminent theologian, master of the Old Testament Scriptures, frontline warrior, brilliant of intellect,” but he chooses *doulos*. Paul was

well aware that to the Romans this was an abject, servile term. However, he also knew that the Jews viewed it as a title of great honor when attached to God. Paul has both views in mind—and both were glorious to him. Elsewhere (1 Corinthians 4:1) he refers to his slavery with another word, one used of the lowest galley slave.

So we see that the key to Paul's self-image is servanthood. At the root of his psyche this incredibly productive man views himself primarily as a slave of Christ. No matter who we are—pastor, teacher, office worker, corporation president—if we are to be productive for God, we must be servants—"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

The next facet of his self-perception is that he sees himself as "called to be an apostle." In Galatians 1:15–17 Paul describes how he persecuted the Church before he was a Christian, and then says,

But when he [God] who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles. . . I went . . .

Paul was not self-appointed! God called him! How essential this was to Paul's ongoing service. Whenever things got rough, he could always reflect upon the evidence of his election: God had summoned him. Therefore, he understood that difficult circumstances did not come because he had wrongly appointed himself as an apostle, but because God had appointed him and he was being faithful. At the base of Paul's self-perception was the fact that his lifework was God's doing. What a comfort—what a motivation!

Closely following, and completing, his self-concept is the final phrase, "set apart for the gospel of God." The word translated "set apart" has the same root as the word "Pharisee." In fact, the Greek sounds very much the same. A Pharisee set himself apart for the Law, but God set Paul apart for the gospel. He was a Pharisee of the highest order. "Fashioned of the same stuff as all other men, a stone differing in no way from other stones, yet in his relation to God—and in this only—he is unique."¹ Paul saw himself as uniquely separated for the preaching of the good news.

How would Paul answer the question, who are you? "I am Paul, a bond servant of Christ, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God—that is who I am." Sometimes pandemonium broke loose around him, and he could have easily felt like a speck of flotsam on the tide—but he did not! He was sustained by his call as an apostle. He was set apart for the good news. Above all, he was a *doulos*. He knew who he was!

Next, how did Paul view his task of preaching the gospel?

Paul's View of Preaching (vv. 2–4)

Verses 1 and 2, taken together, reveal that Paul saw his preaching as an extension of the ancient Old Testament message:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures.

His task was not to proclaim a theological novelty. The gospel was in the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul longed to announce “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the [Old Testament] Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). So much of Messiah was revealed in the Old Testament. Who would Jesus’ mother be? A virgin. Of what house was he to be? Of David. Where would he be born? Bethlehem. What name would he be given? Immanuel. What death would be his? The cross—piercing the body without breaking his bones. Where? At Jerusalem, outside the city.² Paul’s task was rooted as far back as the garden of Eden, the patriarchs, and the prophets.

According to verses 3 and 4 his task was to preach that Christ was both *human* and *divine*. Verse 3 stresses Christ’s humanity by avowing that he “was descended from David according to the flesh.” The Greek here is *ek spermatos*, from the very seed of David—thus emphasizing his intense humanity. Jesus was a man. He was not play-acting.

Verse 4 equally stresses his divinity by saying, “[he] was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit [or his *spirit*] of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.”

The story is told that a certain M. Lepeau complained to Talleyrand that a new religion of his—one he considered a great improvement over Christianity—had failed to catch on with the people. He asked Talleyrand for some suggestions. Talleyrand dryly said, “M. Lepeau, to insure success for your new religion, all you need do is have yourself crucified and then rise from the dead on the third day!” The resurrection “declared” that Jesus was the Son of God. The Greek word is very helpful in getting the force of the idea because it is related to our English word *horizon*, “the boundary between heaven and earth.” God’s mighty deed in raising Jesus from the dead “horizoned” him—that is, it clearly marked out Jesus as the divine Son. Paul’s entire view was dominated by Christ as the Son of God.³

But it must also be noted in verse 4 that Paul says it was not only the

resurrection that declared Christ's divinity, but it was also substantiated "according to the Spirit [or, his *spirit*] of holiness"—that is, the holiness of his human nature. James Denney put it this way: ". . . the sonship, which was declared by the resurrection, corresponded to . . . the spirit of holiness which was the deepest reality in the Person and life of Jesus."⁴ The resurrection verified with power that Christ's perfect life came from his being divine. Paul wanted the Romans to know that his task in sharing the good news was to preach that Jesus, in accord with the ancient Scriptures, was the resurrected human/divine Savior.

Here Paul's life and task come together. He is appointed by God, he is divinely set apart, he is above all a servant—and his message is "horizoned" before him by the resurrection of Jesus who was both human and divine. The entire sky is filled with this reality. It is this vision that drives Paul to such supreme heights of service.

We have seen Paul's view of himself in verse 1, then his view of his task in verses 2–4, and now we come to his view of his power and commission in verses 5, 6.

Paul's View of His Commission (v. 5)

How does Paul perceive his commission? Largely as a matter of *grace*. He says in verse 5: ". . . through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations." Here Paul means grace in the widest sense of God's favor—that is, salvation, guidance, wisdom, illumination, and power to serve. Grace is always an amazing thing to Paul, as we see later in Romans: "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). The grace of God is infinite and eternal. It has no beginning and no end. Karl Barth said, "Only when grace is recognized to be incomprehensible is it grace."⁵ If we think we understand God's love and grace, we are probably without it. Paul views his apostleship and ministry to the Gentiles as the overflow of God's mysterious grace to him.

Everything came from God! "*I the brook, thou the spring.*"⁶

Thus far, Paul has told the Romans what he wants them to know about himself. He is a servant. He is God-appointed, not self-appointed. He is separated out for the gospel. His entire horizon, the very atmosphere of his life, is dominated with the resurrected human-superhuman Christ. And finally he sees his commission and apostolic power in terms of incomprehensible grace to bring about the obedience of faith among the nations.

Paul’s view of himself made all the difference in the world. In fact, it has been making a difference in the world for 2,000 years. What would we be like if we saw ourselves as God-owned, our task as preaching the resurrected Christ, and everything in life as a matter of grace—and our mission to get the gospel out to the world?

Paul’s View of the Roman Believers (vv. 6, 7)

So much for Paul’s self-concept and divine commission. Now, as he closes his introduction in verses 6, 7, he gives his view of the believers in Rome, which suggests how they should regard themselves and how we should regard ourselves. “. . . you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” There are three applications of this verse to us. First, we are “loved by God.” Paul does not mention the believer’s love for God, but rather that which is far more fundamental—God’s love for the believer.

Sometimes I like to recount how much I am loved by thinking of John 3:16 (KJV) in this way:

*For God—The greatest Lover
 so loved—The greatest degree
 the world,—The greatest company
 that he gave—The greatest act
 his only begotten Son,—The greatest gift
 that whosoever—The greatest opportunity
 believeth—The greatest simplicity
 in him—The greatest attraction
 should not perish,—The greatest promise
 but—The greatest difference
 have—The greatest certainty
 everlasting life—The greatest possession.*

Fellow believers, we are loved by God! We need to get used to this, but we should never get over it.

Second, we are “called to be saints.” How is this possible? We are not called because we are saints, but we are saints because we are called. And as saints we are set apart for holiness. Thus, we are in continuity with the saints of all the centuries and are in continuity and unity with each other.

Lastly, we are recipients of “grace” and “peace.” Paul says, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This greeting bears the poetry of redemption, for the regular Greek greeting was “Rejoice!”

(*chaire*), and the regular Jewish greeting was “Peace” (Hebrew *shalom*, Greek *eiriene*). But here Paul combines the two, and then replaces rejoice (*chaire*) with the similar sounding but far richer *charis*—“grace.” He in effect combines the greetings of the Eastern and Western worlds, then modifies the Western and gives the whole world the sublime Christian greeting, “Grace to you and peace.” The two combine naturally and beautifully in cause and effect, because when God’s grace comes upon us, taking away our sins and making us objects of his favor, his peace floods our being.

We have seen how Paul’s self-perception—his image of himself, his task, and his commission and power—made the difference in how he lived his life. Would to God that we would have this same self-perception and know the same fire.

But whether we ascend to his level or not, there is a self-view that all believers of all ages have embraced and which we joyously embrace:

We are loved of God,
We are saints,
We are objects of his grace and unending favor,
His peace is ours
Forever.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

ROMANS 1:8–17

2

Paul's Motivation for Ministry



WHEN MY FAMILY VISITED Park Street Church recently, I made it a point to look for a bronze plaque bearing the inscription, “Joseph S. Olzewski S.K. 2/c U.S.C. Lost February 3, 1943 North Atlantic.” I did this because of a remarkable personal experience that Allan Emery relates in his book *A Turtle on a Fencepost*. The day after Pearl Harbor, Emery, like thousands of others, enlisted—his choice being the Coast Guard. He was immediately put to work in his hometown, Boston, as a quartermaster, and he was given the Friday night duty of guarding one of the wharfs. On one particular Friday he had wisely decided to get some sleep before duty and was in his bunk resting when one of his new acquaintances, Joseph Olzewski, came by in immaculate dress blues—his hat squared, piping on his snow-white cuffs, his shoes spit-shined. He gave his biggest smile and asked Emery how he looked. Emery replied that he looked great and asked what the big event was. Joe excitedly explained that at the USO the previous night a wealthy girl had invited him to spend the weekend at her apartment on Beacon Hill. She was going to take him to the opera that night and had plenty of records and alcohol. He didn’t have to be back until 0700 Monday morning. He ended the story by saying, “This is going to be the greatest time of my life.” Emery replied that he would be praying for him. His friend walked out but immediately reentered asking, “What did you say?”

“I said I’d be praying for you,” replied Emery.

“Why will you be praying for me when I’m going to have the first great weekend in my life?”

“Because, Joe, Monday morning you’ll be back aboard ship and you will not be the same person you are tonight. Sin leaves its mark.”

Joe swore at Emery and went out into the night.

Emery prayed for Joe as he prepared for guard duty. And he was startled when an unsmiling and agitated Joe suddenly reappeared in the guard post floodlights.

“How can you have a good time when someone’s praying for you?” he said. “You’ve ruined my weekend. I stood up my date, and I’ve been waiting until you came on duty. Now tell me how to find God.”

That night Joseph S. Olzewski heard for the very first time in his life the promises of God—and he believed. The change was immediate. He joined Park Street Church, spent his free time on the Common inviting other servicemen to services, prayed with his buddies at St. Paul’s Cathedral, which was always open, and grew in his knowledge of the Scriptures under Dr. Harold Ockenga. Then on February 1, 1943, he volunteered for sea duty on a mine sweeper headed for Iceland, and just a few days out of New York a torpedo found its mark.¹

Stories like this motivate me! They have a way of clearing the fog away and allowing those things that are truly important to appear. My feelings are something like Snoopy in a Peanuts cartoon. Linus had just thrown a stick for Snoopy to retrieve. His first instinct was to chase the stick. But he paused a few moments and decided against it. “I want people to have more to say about me after I’m gone than ‘He was a nice guy . . . he chased sticks.’” When I am reminded of the gospel’s power to change lives, I am motivated to stop “chasing sticks” and get back to what is really important.

That is how the concluding verses (8–17) of Paul’s introduction to the book of Romans affect me, because in them he describes what is behind his own burning motivation to minister at Rome. They encourage us to go for it!

In verses 8–10 Paul writes that he had heard of the Romans’ faith and its widespread fame. This prompted him to make unceasing requests to visit the Christians in Rome. In verses 11–17 he gets down to the specifics of his motivation. First (in verses 11–13), there is the motivation that springs from the prospect of mutual encouragement. Second, in verses 14, 15 there is the motivation that comes from a sense of obligation. Third (vv. 16, 17), there is the motivation that grows from his confidence in the power of the gospel. As we examine these, we will see that they intensify so that the final motivation (his confidence in the gospel’s power) is by far the supreme driving force behind his ministry. As we examine this text, we need to keep in the back of our minds that everyone can enlarge his or her spiritual vision by internalizing the elements of Paul’s motivation to minister to Rome.

Paul's First Ministry Motivation: Mutual Encouragement (vv. 11, 12)

To begin with, as verse 11 indicates, Paul simply wants to help them: "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you." Paul is not sure what gift or gifts he might impart because he has not been to Rome. He simply wishes to enhance their spirituality. Paul said almost the same thing to the church in Corinth: "for I seek not what is yours but you" (2 Corinthians 12:14). He is not in it for what he could do for himself, but what he could do for them.

Paul's spirit was for all practical purposes duplicated in the life of General Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. Once when General Booth stood before Queen Victoria and she asked what she might do for him, the rugged old man replied, "Your Majesty, some people's passion is money, and some people's passion is fame, but my passion has been men."

However, Paul also knows that the benefit would be mutual, as he goes on to say in verse 12, "that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." The apostle claims that the faith of these beginners will encourage him! The Apostle John experienced the same thing:

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:3, 4)

Had someone other than a humble and experienced John or Paul written this, they would have said, "And these things we write, so that *your* joy may be made complete." But John and Paul knew that very few things will strengthen an older believer's faith more than the vibrant faith of a new believer. On the flipside, there is little that will benefit a new believer more than exposure to the mature faith of a more experienced brother or sister in Christ.

What an example this first element of mutual encouragement is to us! I am sure that when Allan Emery and Joseph Olzewski parted, the older could have written what Paul wrote in verses 11, 12:

I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

This mutuality is always one of the grand underlying motivations for ministry. When you experience it, you long for more. *Paul could not get enough!*

Paul's Second Ministry Motivation: A Sense of Obligation (vv. 14, 15)

Paul describes his sense of obligation in verses 14, 15:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

The apostle says he must pay a gospel-debt to all Gentiles. He uses two phrases to describe the entire Gentile population of the world. When he says, “to Greeks and to barbarians,” he means those under Greco-Roman culture and those outside it—everyone! “Wise and . . . foolish” means those who have intelligence and those who do not—everyone! Paul sees himself as a man who cannot rest until every gospel cent is paid to every Gentile creditor. That is why he wants to go to Spain after ministering in Rome (cf. 15:23, 24).

We must note that his debt is to God, but the payment is to men. The great nineteenth-century missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, realized this, as was seen when it was suggested by someone that he had given his life to the Orient because he loved the Chinese. To this he shook his head and answered thoughtfully, “No, not because I loved the Chinese, but because I loved God.”

What a freshness would come to our motivation if we saw ourselves as great debtors to our neighbors, our community, our city—to the poor as well as the rich. This kind of indebtedness might even make us run the risk of appearing a fool by telling a deluded sinner we will pray for him.

Paul's Third Ministry Motivation: Confidence in the Power of the Gospel (vv. 16, 17)

Paul's confidence in the power of the gospel, an underlying and recurrent theme of the book of Romans, is revealed here in two of the most powerful and cherished verses in all of the Bible. If the apostle had been wearing a three-piece suit, he might well have burst the buttons as he gathered his breath to say:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (v. 16)

Rome was *the* city of the world. Her law was the foundation for all that followed, her art was borrowed but appreciated, her military system was the wonder of the world. Yet:

How pitiless she was! . . . Amid all the ruins of her cities we find none of a hospital, none . . . of an orphan school in an age that made many orphans. The pious aspirations and efforts of individuals never seem to have touched the conscience of the people. Rome had no conscience; she was a lustful, devouring beast, made more bestial by her intelligence and splendor.²

When Paul preached at Jerusalem, the religious center of the world, he was mobbed. When he preached at Athens, the intellectual center of the world, he was called a “seed-picker.” When he preached at Rome, the legislative center, he was masterful. He was always ready. He was not ashamed.

Why? “. . .for it [*the gospel*] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (v. 16b). Anyone who has sat for very long under the preaching of the Word has heard many times that the Greek word translated “power” is *dunamis*, the word from which we get *dynamite*. The gospel indeed has incredible power. But because TNT has a negative connotation, it may be better to use the word *dynamic* for the gospel.

“Gospel” means “good news.” There was good news long before the coming of Christ. Whenever a baby was born, it was gospel, “good news.” Paul is not ashamed of this good news because it is the dynamic, unharnessable power of God to effect salvation and all its temporal and eternal benefits for everyone who believes.

We must never be ashamed! Paul said this because he knew of the human proclivity to be embarrassed or to deny what we know to be true. The wonder is that God is not ashamed of us.

How does belief in the gospel of Christ bring salvation? The answer, in verse 17, is one of the most important statements in Scripture: “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” First, the gospel reveals what this “righteousness of God” is—it is a radical, heavenly righteousness. Philippians 3:9 speaks of a “righteousness . . . which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness *from God* that depends on faith.” Second Corinthians 5:21 refers to this God-given righteousness also: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Romans 5:17 calls it “the free gift of righteousness.” It is not human righteousness but “the righteousness of God.” Anders Nygren says, “. . . ‘the righteousness of God’ is a righteousness originating in God, prepared by God, revealed in the gospel and therein offered to us.”³ It is an alien righteousness—righteousness from Heaven.

Second, the gospel is revealed through Christ, who suffered in our place because our human righteousness was not good enough. Through the resurrection he offers his righteousness to us. So we see God's righteousness in the gospel. But specifically we understand this by faith: "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith" (v. 17), an intensified phrase that means "entirely of faith" (Cranfield, Nygren, Hodge).⁴

Paul concludes with a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4—"The righteous shall live by faith." Understanding this makes an eternity of difference for those seeking Christ. When Martin Luther was searching for God, for a long time he thought that "the righteousness of God" was a condemning righteousness. And seeing the righteousness of God as God's standard of judgment sometimes drove him to despair. However, little by little he began to understand, and finally the day came when he saw that *God gives his own righteousness to make man righteous through faith*—"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3:21, 22)—and Luther's life was turned upsidedown. In the library of Rudolstadt, Germany, a glass case holds a letter written by Luther's youngest son, Dr. Paul Luther. It reads:

In the year 1544, my dearest father, in the presence of us all, narrated the whole story of his journey to Rome. He acknowledged with great joy that in that city, through the Spirit of Jesus Christ, he had come to the knowledge of the truth of the everlasting gospel. It happened this way. As he repeated his prayers on the Lateran staircase, the words of the Prophet Habakkuk came suddenly to his mind: "The just shall live by faith." Thereupon he ceased his prayers, returned to Wittenberg, and took this as his chief foundation of all his doctrine.⁵

With this understanding, Luther went on to withstand the entire world!

Think of how the righteousness revealed in Christ motivated Paul! It is possible for men and women to stand sinless before God. It is possible to know that one has eternal life. It is possible to be free from the frustration of trying to earn righteousness and Heaven. The sole requirement is faith. Here is the greatest news ever proclaimed!

Now let us put the puzzle together. First Paul was motivated by the prospect of mutual encouragement. The prospect of ministry was pleasant to Paul, because everyone would benefit. Next he was motivated by a sense of debt. God had given him so much, he could never pay it back. Lastly, and most of all, he was motivated by his confidence in the gospel. He confidently

proclaimed, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (v. 16).

Some of us who know Christ are busy chasing sticks when we should have as our goal something far greater—the ministry of the gospel wherever God has placed us. If we are "chasing sticks," and if we continue as we are, we will be remembered for that alone. How much better to internalize the motivating elements of Paul's life!

Some do not understand what it means to have the righteousness of God. Unlike Joseph Olzewski, they have never known what it is to be free from their sins—to be righteous before God—to have Christ in their life. The Bible has never been alive to them. They have not experienced the joy of being encouraged in the faith.

Christ can change all that. It is so simple. The gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." It is all a matter of faith.

Do you believe?

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

ROMANS 1:18-25

3

Understanding Unbelief, I



HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, the leading voice of Modernist Christianity during the twenties and thirties, expressed some very unorthodox thoughts in the opening chapter of his famous book *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*.¹ To summarize his views: Primitive man had a devilish concept of God. Noah's God destroyed the earth with a flood. Abraham's God was a bloodthirsty God who wanted a human sacrifice. The God of Moses was the horrible God of volcanic fire, speaking to him from Sinai. Little by little man has advanced as the centuries rolled on. David began to have high ethical thoughts of God, but they were mixed with the terrible imprecatory Psalms that call down wrath upon the enemy. By the time of the prophets, God was really improving. He now hated unrighteousness and spoke out against the crimes committed by men. And when Jesus came along, the idea of God took on the marvelous concepts of fatherhood and brotherhood, the greatest idea up to that time. But Jesus also had the repugnant idea of Hell. This, Fosdick argued, must be abandoned in order to continue the upward curve of development.

Fosdick was, of course, reflecting much of the thinking of modern man, whether religious or secular: a loving God cannot be a God of judgment or Hell—enlightened man is progressively shedding such backward ideas.

Lord Bertrand Russell said essentially the same thing in his *Why I Am Not a Christian*:

There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who

would not listen to His preaching. . . . You do not, for instance, find that attitude in Socrates. You find him quite bland and urbane toward the people who would not listen to him, and it is, to my mind, far more worthy of a sage to take that line than to take the line of indignation.²

The idea of a God of wrath and judgment is offensive to modern man's sensibilities.

Any who are sympathetic to some of the thinking just expressed do not like what is stated in the text we will now study. The only salve I can offer is that this is not my message—it is the Spirit's message given through the Apostle Paul to the church at Rome (and to us).

Paul begins his negative thought (the first negative used in the book) by saying in verse 18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . ." God is a God of "*wrath*," or as some translations have it, "anger." It is important that we understand exactly what this means or the rest of the passage will be confusing. First, it does not mean that God is given to a capricious, uncontrolled anger. There are two basic words in the Greek language used to express anger. From *thumos* we get our words *thermometer* and *thermos*. This is red-hot anger—the kind that overcomes people when they lose control and punch someone on the nose. It is impulsive and passionate. That is not the word used in our text. The word here is *orge*, which signifies a settled and abiding condition. It is controlled. "The wrath of God" is not human wrath, which at its best is only a distorted reflection of God's wrath because it is always compromised by the presence of sin. "The wrath of God" is perfect, settled, controlled.

Second, this wrath of God is parallel to the righteousness of God. You will notice that the opening line of verse 17 contains the phrase, "the righteousness of God is revealed," and the opening of verse 18 says, "The wrath of God is revealed." The wrath of God is a counterpart to the righteousness of God.

Third, God's wrath is not directed against goodness, but against "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." "The wrath of God" does not portray a deity who "flies off the handle" and indiscriminately thumps anybody who happens to be at hand. God's wrath is perfect as to its quality and its object. That is the general concept we must keep in mind as we go through our passage.

As Paul continues, he gets very specific as to why the ungodly and unrighteous are under God's wrath, and in doing so he gives us somewhat of an anatomy of unbelief. This passage can help the unbeliever come to belief and can help the believer grasp the distinctives of unbelief and become better equipped to live out Christianity in an unbelieving world.

The First Distinctive of Unbelief: The Suppression of Truth (vv. 18–20)

We see the first specific reason for the wrath of God when we read the whole of verse 18:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

This suppression of the truth is not passive. It carries the idea of holding something down. This is much like the little boy who smuggled his dog into his room to spend the night. When he heard his parents coming, he put the dog in his toybox and sat on the lid, then tried to talk to his parents while ignoring the repeated thump of his poor pet. The idea of suppression here is, *continual and aggressive striving against the truth*. Paul opens our eyes to the fact that all who are without Christ are in the constant process of holding down the truth and therefore are subject to God's abiding anger. There are no exceptions! This is as true in the darkest Pacific jungle as in our concrete forests!

What do unbelievers suppress? Verses 19, 20 tell us. This is again one of the key theological statements in the Holy Scriptures.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

What mankind holds down is the basic knowledge of the majestic transcending power of God as Creator and Sustainer. I cannot agree with those who think that this verse teaches a full-blown natural theology wherein all the attributes of God are easily discernible to the observer of nature, so that by watching the universe they come to the explicit conclusion of God's existence and the need for the sacrifice of Christ. Our text is very clear that "his invisible attributes" are "his eternal power and divine nature" (v. 20), and that is what Nature reveals. Along with this, man sees by implication his own finiteness—the great gulf between himself and God.

One summer one of my associate pastors and I were walking home together on a particularly clear night. We looked at the North Star, the Big Dipper, the Pleiades. My fellow minister identified the Dog Star (Sirius), the brightest in both hemispheres. Then we began to joke about how all this happened "by chance." The vastness and precision of our cosmos declares the necessity of a magnificent God!

The argument from order is overwhelming. If I put ten pennies in my

pocket and number them 1 to 10, then put my hand back in my pocket, my chances of pulling out the number 1 penny would be one in ten. If I place the number 1 penny back in my pocket and mix all the pennies again, the chances of pulling out penny number 2 would be one in a hundred. The chances of repeating the same procedure and coming up 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 nearly four million! Noting the order and design of our universe, Kepler—founder of modern astronomy, discoverer of the “Three Planetary Laws of Motion,” and originator of the term *satellite*—said, “The undevout astronomer is mad.” David sang:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge. (Psalm 19:1, 2)

And he wandered away and away
With Nature, the dear old nurse,
Who sang to him night and day
The rhymes of the universe.³

Creation reveals the existence of a God who presides in majestic, transcendent, sustaining power. It also reveals the infinite distance between us (creatures) and him (the Creator).

Verse 19 says, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” The word “plain” means manifest. This is not a secret, covert revelation. There is no need for a Diogenes with his lamp. You do not have to be an intellectual. All can understand as much as they need to know.

Paul concludes in verse 20, “they are without excuse.” Bertrand Russell, who dismisses “The Argument from Design” in three paragraphs, is without excuse. So is the cabbie who has never read a book in his life. The truth is, it takes a concerted act of the will to deny that a vastly powerful God made and sustains the Creation. If one is not at least searching after God, he or she is suppressing the truth.

The first distinctive of the anatomy of unbelief, then, is the suppression of the truth. The second is a perversion of the truth.

The Second Distinctive of Unbelief:

The Perversion of the Truth (vv. 21–23)

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts

were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (vv. 21–23)

The opening phrase of verse 21 tells how perversion to idolatry initially came about. “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God. . .” means there was a time when idolaters saw God as majestic, transcendent, all-powerful, infinitely greater than themselves. However, though they understood this, they did not honor him but instead worshiped images like themselves. They refused to worship God for who he is and rather reduced him to their own level through idolatry. They minimized the vast chasm between the creature and the Creator.

This resulted in a progressively degenerating idolatry. In verse 21b Paul says, “their foolish hearts were darkened.” This is significant because “heart” is a comprehensive term for all man’s faculties. Not only was their moral judgment darkened, but their intellect and reasoning power suffered also. The magnificent idea of God as revealed in Nature was lost to them. The tragedy of idolatry is that it falls infinitely short of giving its people any idea of what God is really like! Verse 22 says, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” The root word for “fools” is the same root from which we derive our word *moron*. This is an ugly term that refers not so much to one’s intellect as to his moral condition.

Verse 23 portrays the progressive degeneration that the perversion of idolatry brings. First they worshiped an image of a man, second birds, then quadrupeds, and ultimately reptiles—crawling things. You cannot go any lower than this.

So we see that first man suppresses the truth about the greatness of God, and then he perverts it by worshiping insulting images. In essence, having gotten rid of the true knowledge of God, he worships images with which he is comfortable. *The ungodly man worships himself.*

We must ever keep before us the “eternal power and divine nature” of God as revealed in creation! We must always consciously strive to remember his majestic transcendence and his “otherness” or we will fall into idolatry. Quite frankly, even those of us in the evangelical tradition, with its valid and needed emphasis on the availability of God in Christ, are in danger of this form of idolatry. Very often we hear God addressed in casual terms that would scandalize some of our earthly employers. Sometimes we hear music that so sentimentalizes Christ that he is emptied of his divinity. We need to be careful! We must never address God with anything but the most humble attitude.

We must never jest about him or about divine things. We must keep our own creatureliness and his supremacy before us.

The Third Distinctive of Unbelief: The Perversion of Life (vv. 24, 25)

The final distinctive of unbelief is the perversion of life itself.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (vv. 24, 25)

The logic here is so clear: first a suppression of the majestic revelation of God, then a perversion to man-centered idolatry, and finally a perversion of man himself. “In the end their humanism (man-centeredness) resulted in the dehumanization of each other.”⁴ In the end, man lowers himself to a condition below God’s created purpose. As we will see in our next study, man, having rejected the witness of God in creation, goes on to live contrary to the very order of creation.

We have seen something of the “why” of the wrath of God, but our text also tells us something of the “how” of God’s wrath: “God gave them up . . . to impurity.” This terrifying phrase (“God gave them up”) is repeated three times before chapter 1 closes. God avenges himself by allowing the ever-deepening decline of evil men and women. That is what we see today all around us—men and women have slipped to such depths that it would disgrace animals to have such conduct among them. God’s wrath is all around us, and it seems that more wrath (God’s giving people up to sin) is falling daily.

Of course, we also know that God’s wrath is not yet completely worked out. I am reminded of the story of a farmer who was an unbeliever and antagonistic to the gospel. He owned a piece of land contiguous to the local church. On the Lord’s Day he got great joy out of running his tractor back and forth beside the church. Spring came, and his corn sprouted. It was more than knee-high by the Fourth of July, and in the fall there was a tremendous harvest. He had the greatest satisfaction in this, so he wrote a letter to the pastor of the church. In it he said that obviously God did not exist because the farmer had consciously gone against what the Christians felt were the structures of God, and yet look how he was blessed. The pastor wrote just one line back to him: “God doesn’t settle his accounts in October.”

There is one other aspect of the “wrath of God” that is demanded by the

parallelism with “the righteousness of God” in verse 17. Just as “the righteousness of God” was best revealed in Christ’s death on the cross, so too is the wrath of God. We understand from the Gospels that after Jesus gave his mother to John, darkness fell upon the land from the sixth hour until the ninth hour. Was this darkness sent to hide the hideous physical sufferings of God’s Son? No. It was to hide the agony of his Son as he became a curse for us. In Jewish thinking, to be cursed was to be separated from God. Jesus had never known anything but face-to-face fellowship with the Father. They had worked together in the creation of the universe. They were one another’s delight. Now, as Jesus bore our sins, he became a curse. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13).

At that moment of separation, the pain from the nails was nothing to Jesus. Neither was the flayed back or the uneven stake. There is no experience so painful as separation from God. Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1). The wrath of God against our sin was seen when Christ suffered alone for our sins.

If a man is not a Christian, it is because he is suppressing the truth about God, pushing down God’s own revelation of who he is. Further, he is not a Christian because he is given to idolatry. Martin Luther said, “Whatever your heart clings to and relies on is your god.” An unbeliever has his own “self-created gods.” Finally, he is under God’s wrath when he fails to acknowledge in his heart of hearts the extent of his sin. And if he dies without Christ he will go to Hell. Jesus said, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

Consider the two revelations: the revelation of the wrath of God justly coming upon all mankind because man suppresses the truth, perverts the truth, and perverts life, and secondly the revelation of the righteousness of God from faith for faith, righteousness he gives us so we can stand righteous before him. If one does not have the righteousness of God, he or she has the wrath of God. Those are the two revelations and the two choices. Are you under the wrath of God today? Or do you cling to the righteousness of God that has been revealed to you?

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

ROMANS 1:24–32

4

Understanding Unbelief, II



SEVERAL YEARS AGO when I was studying the opening chapters of Romans, I took a few minutes to scribble a positive alternative rendering of Romans 1:24–32. This is what I wrote:

Therefore, God *gave them up* in their hearts to self-control and purity, that their bodies might be honored among them. For they kept and cherished the truth of God and worshiped and served the Creator, who is blessed forever, rather than the creature. Amen.

For this reason God *gave them up* to pure and wholesome lives, lived with carefree ease even in the most intimate relations so that all received in their own persons the due reward of their fidelity.

And just as they saw fit to acknowledge God in all things, God *gave them up* to a sound mind, to do those things which are proper, being filled with all righteousness, goodness, generosity, kindness; full of selflessness, life, healing, openness, kindness; they are gentle in speech, always building others up, lovers of God, respectful, humble, self-effacing, inventors of good, obedient to parents, understanding, trustworthy, loving, merciful; and as they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are possessors of life, they do the same, and give hearty approval to those who do likewise.

By reversing Paul's thoughts, one of the most terrible portions of Scripture becomes sublime. God's grace brings freedom from bondage, light from darkness, life from death. I would like to suggest that we keep this in mind as we tunnel through the final verses of Romans 1 because it is a dark journey. To be frank, these verses leave little about which to smile. At the same time, the truth they hold is needed today as much as at any other time in history—especially in the history of our nation.

This dark passage can bring grace to those without Christ, just as it did to a brilliant physician in one of Richard Halverson’s Bible studies on Romans who said, “I don’t ever remember reading the Bible, but tonight I have seen myself in Romans 1; now what do I do about it?”¹

As we have seen, the background of the passage consists of this: All unbelievers suppress the truth of God’s “eternal power and divine nature.” As they refuse to honor him and exchange the great truth for a lie, they bring about an idol-making perversion of the truth. Finally their suppression and perversion of the truth culminates in a perversion of life, until God gives them up to their sin.

God allows men and women to go as far down as they desire. His wrath is shown in the removal of his restraining power. What we have in verses 24–32 are the dimensions of the depravity to which unbelieving men and women will go in working out God’s wrath on themselves. I have titled these verses, “The Dimensions of Depravity.” It is good for us to consider all this because any Christian who truly grasps mankind’s depravity will be more effective in living for Christ in this fallen world. There are three aspects to man’s fallenness:

- The Sensual Dimension (vv. 24–27)
- The Mental Dimension (vv. 28–31)
- The Ultimate Dimension (v. 32)

As we discuss the sensual dimension, we will do our best to stay within the bounds of propriety. At the same time we must speak frankly about what our text says.

The Sensual Dimension of Depravity (vv. 24–27)

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (vv. 24–27)

In plain language Paul was referring to sexual perversion, both heterosexual (v. 24) and homosexual inversion (vv. 26, 27). While both are in view, the emphasis is upon homosexual inversion as an illustration of the extremity

of mankind's depravity. The text is even more explicit in the original than in our English translations. The words used for "men" and "women" are literally "male" and "female," so that verses 26 and 27 really read like this:

. . . for their females exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way the males abandoned the natural function of the female and burned in their desire toward one another, males with males committing indecent acts [or, as Dr. Robertson suggests, "deformities"²] and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

There is no doubt as to what the apostle is speaking about. Why does Paul, in describing the depth of mankind's depravity, turn first to sexual sin—especially homosexuality? There are other sins that are just as bad. As C. S. Lewis wrote:

If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasure of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me competing with the human self which I must try to become: they are the animal self, and the diabolical self: and the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig, who goes regularly to church, may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But of course, it's better to be neither.³

Why does Paul single out homosexuality then? Because it is so obviously unnatural, and therefore automatically underlines the extent to which sin takes mankind. Other sins are just as evil, but they are naturally evil. God has emphasized the sin of inversion to show us that inside the unbelieving man is a running sore that indicates a far deeper dimension of the wounds of sinful society. (We should note that chapter 1 ends with the sins of the mind and spirit, of which all sinners are guilty.)

I would also offer a brief word to those who are involved in homosexual inversion. It is not a sickness, but a sin,⁴ and that ought to be encouraging because there is a remedy for sin, whereas many sicknesses have no cure. The Scriptures indicate that homosexuality is a sin from which one can recover.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified,

you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–11)

Some of the Corinthians were previously homosexuals, drunkards, thieves, but they were “washed”—*cleansed*.

Paul also emphasized this sin because it was all around him. He was writing from Corinth, the sin capital of Asia. Greek culture taught that homosexual love was the purest and highest of loves. Many highborn Greeks maintained male lovers along with their wives. It was no different in Rome. Fourteen of the first fifteen emperors were homosexuals. Sounds like today, does it not? Romans 1 describes any major city in the world today: Hong Kong, San Francisco, Vienna, Zagreb, Berlin, New York, Tokyo, Chicago.

Dr. R. H. Graves, who once ministered in Canton, said that a man he met declared Paul could not have written this chapter, but only a modern missionary who had been in China. Romans is for today! Romans is relevant! A 1982 issue of *Time* magazine indicated that homosexuals made up 15 to 20 percent of the population of San Francisco and that the City Council passed, by an 8–3 vote,

... new rules which require the city to treat all qualifying [i.e., *homosexual*] live-in partners as if they were spouses. For instance, they will have the same visitation rights at local jails and hospitals, and city workers would get a day off to attend a mate’s funeral. But what backers were most eager to win was low-cost (\$50 a month) health benefits, which city employees will pay for at the same rate as they do for a husband or wife.⁵

A mainline denomination’s magazine carried an admonishment that said essentially this: Homosexuality should be accepted as a variant lifestyle—the homosexual relationship is neither unnatural, sinful, nor sick. In this article practicing homosexuals were portrayed as whole, healthy, appealing persons. In the Chicago area, where I ministered, this sin is rampant. I talked to one physician who said he treated two or three people a week who are diseased or fearful of disease because of homosexuality. He said, “The average person in this town thinks that our city is relatively free of homosexuality—that those with such problems live outside its borders. That just isn’t true.” Paul describes the running sores of a depraved society that has suppressed the truth of God—and it turns out that he is describing *our* country, *our* town, *our* neighborhood. Where these things exist, so do all the elements of depravity.

At the end of verse 27 Paul completes his thoughts on this subject with an ominous statement: “and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their

error.” Anyone who has counseled those in bondage to this sin know what Paul is talking about—a loss of personal identity, an uncertainty as to one’s role and place in life. Yet there is another element to this that is substantiated by the statement’s parallelism with verse 24 (“the dishonoring of their bodies”). God’s wrath falls as a penalty on their very bodies.

The “Great Pox” of Columbus’s sailors introduced a virulent strain of syphilis that spread to the rest of the world in less than 100 years. The disease existed from far more distant times, but never like this. A 1972 issue of *Time* said:

After the ordinary cold, syphilis and gonorrhea are the most common infectious diseases among young people, outranking all cases of hepatitis, measles, mumps, scarlet fever, strep throat and tuberculosis put together.⁶

That was 1972. Who knows what the statistics are today.

The sexually transmitted herpes virus infection can also be dated to ancient times, but today it is epidemic. A 1982 *Time* cover story, “The New Scarlet Letter,” revealed that an estimated 20,000,000 Americans now have sexually communicated herpes. Worse, it is completely incurable. As *Time* said, “It won’t kill you, but you won’t kill it either.” The reason for the virus’s exponential increase, according to *Time*, has been the escalation of sexual license.⁷

By far the most terrifying event to those involved in sexual perversion is the occurrence, largely in the gay community, of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), from which the victims lose their immunities to disease and eventually die of pneumocistis pneumonia or a cancer called Kaposi sarcoma.

This “receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error” is an outworking of the wrath of God because of the suppression of the truth. But it is also a sign of the grace of God, for a couple of reasons.

First, the fear of contracting a sexually transmitted disease is a great inducement to refrain from sexual license. Married and unmarried philanderers have become extremely wary. Monogamy and fidelity are on the upswing.

But there is a second element of God’s grace—and that is that some people, through the pain of disease and personal fragmentation, have come to the end of themselves and have become finally ready for a massive dose of God’s grace. It is their only hope.

As we have seen, sexual license—especially inversion—reveals to us the dimensions of a society’s depravity. According to Biblical revelation, what we see around us means that our particular culture is on the skids. If we are

believers, this encourages us to draw close to Christ so that we are really living what we say we believe. If we are unbelievers, it is meant to drive us (as it did the brilliant physician we mentioned) to faith.

Most of us are not caught in the sins of perversion and inversion. Perhaps we could congratulate ourselves (God help us!) on not having committed those sins. But none of us, whether as nonbelievers or even as believers, can truly deny experiencing most of the dimensions of mental depravity.

The Mental Dimension of Depravity (vv. 28–31)

Paul says that unbelieving minds become debased minds.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. (v. 28)

Literally, they were given up to “a rejected mind.” They rejected God, and God rejected their mental attitude. Cranfield says that such a mind is “so debilitated and corrupted as to be a quite untrustworthy guide in moral decision.”⁸ This does not mean that man is as bad as he could be, for there is always room for “deprovement.”

Paul then gives, in verses 29–31, the specific dimensions of a debased mind. It would be easy to imagine that these are the exaggerations of an hysterical moralist, but the Greek and Roman writers said the same things themselves—and sometimes more.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents. . .

. . . foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (vv. 29–31)

These are the dimensions of the “debased [or rejected] mind.” Not all those who are without Christ have done all these things, but these kinds of things come most naturally to them. The tendency is for deeper and deeper decline.

The Ultimate Dimension of Depravity (v. 32)

Verse 32, which gives the ultimate dimension of the sinful mind, neatly frames this terrible picture:

Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Man reaches the nadir of depravity when he heartily applauds those who give themselves to sin. To delight in those who do evil is a sure way to become even more degraded than the sinners one observes. This, I think, was one of the supreme horrors of the Roman Colosseum. Those committing the mayhem were supremely guilty, but those watching and applauding were perhaps even more wretched.

What a telling application this has on our media-captivated society. Millions sit in their living rooms watching debauchery, violence, deceit, and many other vices—and applaud what they see! It makes little difference whether the vices are real or portrayed, the effect is much the same—an increasingly debased mind on the part of the viewer. Approving another's sin or encouraging another's sin is a sign that life has reached its lowest dimension.

We Christians are not exempt from this. Satan knows that if he can get us to laugh at things we believe we would never do, our defenses will fall. Maybe someday our unwitting approval will give way to action. We need to be careful what we watch and applaud.

As Thomas Aquinas pointed out, according to Psalm 8 man is made a little lower than the angels. This suggests that man is in a position somewhere between the angels above and the beasts below. Angels are spirits without bodies. (Sometimes they take on bodies, but they are spirit beings.) Animals are bodies without spirits. Man is in between because he is body and spirit. This puts man in a mediating position. It has always been man's prerogative to move upward toward the spiritual or downward toward the animal, and we become like that upon which we focus. This is why we cannot sin "a little bit." All sin moves us downhill individually, nationally, and culturally.

As our society has moved downward toward the beast, no one seems able to say, "This far and no further." No one can put a limit on sensuality. Incest is even being promoted by some. Our culture has been unable to draw the line on pornography. Such are the dimensions of depravity.

What is the answer? Why does God give a civilization over to this kind of thing? He does it because when darkness prevails, and despair and violence are widespread, men and women are most ready to come to the light. He gives mankind up so that in their despair they might give themselves to his grace. Do you remember Isaiah's prediction?

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2)

In the first century mankind was sunk in the darkness of despair. Idolatry

had penetrated the whole world. Men had turned from the true God, whom they could have known. In that hour, in the darkness of the night, over the skies of Bethlehem the angels broke through, and a great light of hope shone forth. From that hope all light streams. The angels' message was the coming of the Lord Jesus, the availability of the gift of the "righteousness of God" (cf. 1:17).

Against the growing darkness of our own time we need to make this message as clear as we possibly can—by our testimony, by our lives, by the joy and peace of Heaven in our hearts. God has found a way to break through human weakness, arrogance, despair, and sinfulness to give us peace, joy and gladness. Just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem so long ago, so he can be born in any person's heart now. This is the good news of the gospel. In this decaying world in which we live, we can see again the glory of this truth as it delivers people from their sins. "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).⁹

In Ephesians 2, Paul paints a similar picture of the dimensions of man's depravity, concluding in verse 3 with: "[we] were by nature children of wrath." However, he does not stop there but continues:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God . . . (vv. 4–8)

Christ came in the darkest night, and he can meet us even in the midnight of our souls.



The PREACHING *the*
WORD SERIES
IS WRITTEN BY
PASTORS FOR PASTORS
AND THEIR CHURCHES



crossway.org/preachingtheword

The Preaching the Word series is written
BY PASTORS FOR PASTORS
and their churches

Preaching the Word commentaries are written by pastors for pastors, as well as for all who teach or study God's Word. With pastor R. Kent Hughes as the series editor, experienced pastors and teachers model expository preaching and practical application. This series is noted for its steadfast commitment to Biblical authority, clear exposition of Scripture, and readability, making it widely accessible for both new and seasoned pastors, as well as men and women hungering to read the Bible in a fresh way.

This commentary on Romans surveys the fundamental doctrines of Christianity—themes of justification by faith, freedom from sin, and God's adoption of sinners—and helps us to experience the power of Paul's theological treatise.

PRAISE FOR THIS SERIES

"This series resonates with the priorities of the pulpit. No academic aloofness here, but down-to-earth, preacher-to-preacher meat for God's people."

Bryan Chapell, *Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA), Peoria, Illinois*

"The single best resource for faithful Biblical exposition available today. A great boon for genuine reformation!"

Timothy George, *Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University*

"There is a long history of informed, edifying Biblical expositions that have been mightily used of God to shape and strengthen the Church. These volumes admirably fit this tradition."

D. A. Carson, *Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School*

"Throughout the Christian centuries, working pastors have been proving themselves to be the best of all Bible expositors. Kent Hughes stands in this great tradition, and his exciting expositions uphold it worthily."

J. I. Packer, *Board of Governors' Professor of Theology, Regent College*

"It is a pleasure to commend this series of homiletical commentaries. They fill an enormous vacuum that exists between the practical needs of the pastor/teacher and the critical exegetical depth of most commentaries."

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *President Emeritus and Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and Ethics, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY