

Romans 1:18-32
(Psalm 19:1-6; John 1:9-14)
“So They Are Without Excuse”

Introduction

How often has this happened to you? You have just been thinking of the goodness of God in sending his Son to save us when a troubling thought crosses your mind: What about all those who have never heard the good news of the gospel? How can a just God hold people who have never heard the gospel responsible for failure to believe in him? How can God possibly punish those who have never heard the good news?

The verses before us address that question, as Paul makes his case that the incredibly good news of God’s grace can only be understood as good news over against the incredibly bad news of the human condition – the condition of everyone of us apart from God’s grace. What do I mean?

Paul has just given us, in verses 16 & 17, an exquisitely simple description of what the gospel is and how the gospel saves us. But before we can delight in the gospel and embrace it with all our heart, we must first understand why we need the gospel, why in fact we are lost and without hope apart from the gospel. This Paul sets out to do, and he will make his case beginning here in the first half of chapter one and continuing through the first half of the chapter three, addressing first the gentile world, then the Jewish world, and finally the entire world together.

Note how he makes his case: the gospel that Paul has just been describing reveals God’s mighty power to save, and it rests upon his mercy and grace. But now Paul tells us that God has also revealed to us his hatred of sin and his opposition to human rebellion. The Bible calls this God’s “wrath.” Some people think that the Old Testament reveals a wrathful God and the New Testament takes us to a higher plane by revealing a merciful God. But this is a misreading of the plain sense of both Old Testament and New.

Both testaments describe a God whose mercy is great and endures forever, yet who hates sin and rebellion and punishes with righteous judgment those who persist in their wickedness and rebellion against him. However, God’s wrath is not like human anger, based upon emotion and often out-of-control in its expression. Rather, God’s wrath is his just and righteous response to human sin and rebellion.

In the verses before us, we find woven together a description on the one hand of humanity’s three-fold betrayal of God’s grace and mercy, a three-fold expression of humanity’s desire to be left alone to pursue its own ends apart from God, and on the other hand God’s three-fold response to human rebellion, the three-fold individual and cultural consequences of our sin.

Body

1. Paul first describes the basis of God's wrath (1:18-21).

God's common grace and general revelation are available to all people at all times in all places. Although not all people have heard the good news of God the Savior, all have seen ample evidence of God the Creator, who is to be worshiped and served (1:19-20). Here, Paul answers the question of those who have never heard the gospel: they still have seen ample evidence of the Creator God to whom they owe their very existence.

But, astonishingly, all have rejected God as offered through general revelation, and have chosen instead to recreate gods in their own image (1:21,22). This rebellion has expressed itself in a three-fold betrayal of God, which Paul proceeds to describe.

2. Paul then describes humanity's three-fold betrayal of God (1:22-32 esp. 23,25,26).

Human rebellion against the God who created us for intimate friendship with him expresses itself in three deadly exchanges of God's life-giving gifts for soul-destroying behaviors:

First, he describes a spiritual betrayal: They exchange the glory of God for images of creation (1:23).

Secondly, he describes an intellectual betrayal: They exchange the truth of God for a lie (1:25).

Thirdly, he describes a physical betrayal: They exchange natural relations for unnatural (1:26).

3. Finally, Paul describes the three-fold consequences of humanity's betrayal of God (1:24-32, esp. 24,26,28).

This three-fold betrayal of God by humanity results in a three-fold expression of God's turning humanity over to the consequences of its rebellion:

First, in response to humanity's spiritual betrayal, God gives them up to impurity, expressed sexually by immoral behavior (1:24).

Secondly, in response to humanity's intellectual betrayal, God gives them up to dishonorable passions, expressed sexually by homosexual behavior (1:26).

Thirdly, in response to humanity's physical betrayal, God gives them up to a debased mind, which not only indulges immoral and unnatural behavior, but *approves* of such behavior (1:28, 32). Can anyone doubt that our culture has reached this third and final phase? In fact, the discomfort many of us feel at the mere suggestion that homosexual behavior is unnatural, rather than an alternative way of expressing our sexuality, is an indication of this three-fold release from the truth of God.

And please realize that Paul is not "bashing gays," or holding homosexual behavior up as a sin greater than other sins. The worst sin described in the Scripture, and the basis of all other sin, is spiritual pride and self-worship. Paul is not trying to show that some are sinners while others are righteous. He is in the process of an argument aimed to prove that all have sinned and that none will be justified before God based upon one's own righteousness (3:19,20).

Conclusion

Have you at least caught a glimpse of what Paul is doing here? What a tragedy! God offers himself and humanity answers "No!" God reveals: "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). Humanity conceals: "who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (1:18). If this were all that is revealed – God's wrath against human rebellion – then we would be without hope.

But against this dark backdrop shines the more brightly the good news of God's grace toward undeserving sinners like you and me, the good news which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (1:16). Paul is describing our desperate plight in order to show us the wonder of our rescue. Like a good doctor, he is telling us in painful detail the desperate nature of our illness in order to convince us of our need of radical treatment if we are to live.

Thank God that we are not left only with a desperate diagnosis but no cure, left only with his general revelation but no gospel. Thank God that the purpose of this letter is to describe God's special revelation of his Son, the gospel of grace from faith for faith, and the life that is offered to those who receive God's salvation.

You will spend your life worshiping either God or the things of this world, seeking either his glory or your own. The one way leads to loving acceptance in Christ and eternal life, while the other leads to rejection and eternal death. Choose life that you may live!