

PARADISE LOST "COMMON KNOWLEDGE" ROMANS 1:18-23

The only thing worse than being terminally ill is not knowing that you're terminally ill. Tragically, many haven't heard that they're dying *physically* because they're dead *spiritually*, or they've heard it but don't believe it. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: "There is no one righteous, not even one . . . For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:10, 23). He also writes: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23).

Before elaborating on the gospel in which "a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (1:17), he declares "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18). But what does the wrath of God have to do with the gospel? It's not part of the gospel. According to one commentator, "Paul implicitly acknowledges that 1:18-3:20 is an interruption in his exposition of the righteousness of God by reprising 1:17 in 3:21: 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested. . . .' Why this interruption? What is the purpose of this step-by-step indictment of humanity? It is a necessary preparation if what Paul wants to emphasize about this righteousness is to be accepted by the Romans. For only if sin is seen to be the dominating, ruling force that Paul presents it to be in this section (cf. 3:9) will it become clear why God's righteousness can be experienced only by humbly receiving it as a

One is punished by the very things by which he sins.

– Wisdom of Solomon 11:16

gift—in a word, by faith. 'Only those who are prepared to acknowledge that they are unworthy can put faith in the Giver of grace.' And only if Jews as much as Gentiles are understood to be subject to this imprisoning effect of sin will it become clear that all people need to experience this righteousness of God . . . So absolute is sin's power over people that only God's power, available in the gospel, can rescue them" (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, 92).

Jesus, the Great Physician, said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17). The Core Competency Humanity affirms that all people need Jesus Christ as their Savior. They need him as their Savior because they are terminally ill sinners. But until people recognize their true condition, they will not turn to the Great Physician for healing.

This Week's Core Competency

Humanity – I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

A negative can be used to express a positive. When Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel" (Ro 1:16), he means, "I am proud of the gospel," or perhaps, "I unhesitatingly proclaim the gospel." Likewise, the expression "nobody's perfect!" means "everybody's imperfect." Put differently, "nobody's sinless" means "everybody's sinful." I find it interesting that people have a problem with the words "sin," "sinful," and "sinner." I can only imagine they deem these words to be judgmental or passe like "Jesus Saves." Ironically to my mind, the same people who readily admit they're not perfect may only reluctantly admit they're sinful. But "not
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perfect" and "sinful" have essentially the same sense; do they not? Paul puts this truth another way. He writes: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23), where "the glory of God" is a reference to God's divine perfection. As Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Clearly, God is sinless; people are sinful.

Ironic, too, is the fact that the very sin people only reluctantly recognize in themselves they readily recognize in others. For example, while avoiding calling them "sins," they rapidly rant against the evils of injustice, violence, and the abuse of power, as well as the exploitation of women, children, and the poor. And rightly so. Consider the "#MeToo" movement's condemnation of sexual assault and harassment in the workplace. Besides that, all around us entertainment regularly explores the ins and outs of such sins and the characters caught up in them. As the stories go, crimes are committed, and as deeply flawed heroes and heroines search for the perpetrators, a portrayal of the universal human condition unfolds. In a drama I watched recently, the protagonist detective mused, "I no longer think in terms of black and white, good and bad. Even the best of us is capable of the most heinous deeds." What's more, cable news reports incidents of terrorism, human trafficking, political corruption, child abuse, and celebrity immorality 24-7. In the face of such facts, how can the word "sin" possibly be deemed obsolete?

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Romans 1:18-23

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. 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.*

Cf., another translation

18 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness, 19 because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (NET)*

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle "is being revealed" in v. 18.
- * Bracket "wrath of God" in v. 18.
- * Underline "godlessness and wickedness" in v. 18.
- * Circle "suppress" in v. 18.
- * Box "since" and "because" indicating *reason* in v. 19.
- * Circle "divine nature" in v. 20.
- * Box "so that" indicating *result* in v. 20.
- * Box "For" indicating *reason* in v. 21.
- * Box "but" indicating *contrast* in v. 21.
- * Circle "futile" in v. 21.
- * Highlight "exchanged" in v. 23.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Paul says the wrath of God is *being revealed* (present tense) against the godlessness and wickedness of people *now*. How so?
2. Isn't "wrath" unbecoming of God? Explain why you agree or disagree.
3. Put any difference you see between "godlessness" and "wickedness" in your own words.
4. How can Paul accuse people of suppressing the truth?
5. Give an example of your personal experience of God's wrath prior to your salvation.
6. List some "invisible qualities" of God that you can see clearly from creation.
7. Explain the *contrast* in verse 21.
8. Read verses 22-23 carefully. Idol worship, is it alive and well today? Explain.
9. **Discussion:** Discuss which you think is *more* destructive, believing there is no God or living like there is no God.

Paul begins his explanation of the gospel in his epistle to the Romans by revealing the universal need for it (1:18-3:23). Everyone needs to have faith in Jesus Christ, because everyone needs "the righteousness from God . . . that is by faith from first to last" (1:17). Everyone needs this righteousness because "there is no one righteous, not even one" (3:10); "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). One commentator explains: "Instead of plunging at once into an exposition of the gospel, Paul launches into a lengthy exposure of the sinfulness of man. This is sound procedure, for until men are persuaded of their lost condition they are not likely to be concerned about deliverance. So Paul undertakes to demonstrate in the human situation a grievous lack of the righteousness God requires" (Everett F. Harrison, "Romans," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 10:21).

First, Paul describes the sin of the Gentiles (1:18-32), then, the sin of the Jews (2:1-3:8), and finally, the sin of all people—Gentiles and Jews alike (3:9-20). Romans 1:18-23 belongs to that first section, which describes the sin of humanity apart from special revelation, mainly that of the Gentiles. He points out how their rebellion against God's revelation of himself in nature has led to terrible distortions of the natural order and to the worship of what God has created instead of the Creator himself (1.23, 25), bringing with it dire consequences, namely God's wrath. He thus endorses the idea, found in the Wisdom of Solomon 11:16, that "One is punished by the very thing in which one sins."

According to one commentator, "Paul believes that all religious actions have ethical implications and personal consequences, as did other early Jews. For instance, Jubilees 21.22 urges that one must be cautious not to commit some major willful sin lest God deliver the sinner into the power of his own sin. More pointed however is Testament of Gad 5.10: 'By whatever human capacity anyone transgresses, by that he is also chastised.' 'God's wrath, then, takes the form of God's giving humans up to the chaos for which we have voted'" (Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 65).

Romans 1:18-23 opens with the assertion, "The

wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18), and then Paul explains why (vv. 19-20)—because God makes "his eternal power and divine nature" known to them through natural revelation, leaving them without excuse, and yet they refuse to acknowledge and worship him (v. 21).

Psalm 19:1-4 reads:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.*

Paul goes on to explain that instead, they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles" (v. 23) and in the process became fools. "Note that first on the list of false gods is *man*. This fulfilled Satan's purpose when he told Eve, "Ye shall be as God!" (Gen. 3:5, NASB). "Glory to man in the highest!" Satan encouraged man to say. Instead of man being made in God's image, man made gods in his own image—and then descended so low as to worship birds, beasts, and bugs" (Warren W. Wiersbe, "Romans," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 1:518-19).

Here Paul "describes the terrible proclivity of all people to corrupt the knowledge of God they possess by making gods of their own. This tragic process of human 'god-making' continues apace in our own day, and Paul's words have as much relevance for people who have made money or sex or fame their gods as for those who carved idols out of wood and stone. Thus, as vv. 24-31 show, the whole dreadful panoply of sins that plague humanity has its roots in the soil of this idolatry" (Moo, 110)—idolatry evident in humanism and materialism in the West, as well as idol worship and mysticism in the East.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

The Message of the Passage

Because people oppose the truth of God made plain in creation and refuse to glorify him or give him thanks, they are without excuse and their foolish hearts are darkened.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22. Reflect on the message of Romans 1:1-7 and your response to it.

You believe the message of this passage. Is it a message for believers or unbelievers? Explain.

How would you share it with an unbeliever in an understandable yet unoffensive way?

Who might you share this message with, and how might you get around to it?

notes **N** STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 18 **wrath of God** Temporally speaking, God's wrath is both present and future. "Paul speaks of wrath as a present reality under which people outside of Christ stand, and often, following the OT prophets, predicts the outpouring of God's wrath on the future day of judgment" (Moo, 100). Wrath is an expected aspect of God's person. "That Paul would attribute to God a capricious, irrational rage is more than improbable. But a consideration of what Dodd calls 'the highest human ideals of personality' might well lead us to question whether God could be the good and loving God, if he did not react to our evil with wrath. For indignation against wickedness is surely an essential element of human goodness in a world in which moral evil is always present. A man who knows, for example, about the injustice and cruelty of apartheid, and is not angry at such wickedness cannot be a thoroughly good man; for his lack of wrath means a failure to care for his fellow man, a failure to love" (E. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 1:109).

v. 18 **is being revealed** Just as "a righteousness from God is being revealed" (v. 17) *now*, so also is "the wrath of God being revealed" (v. 18) *now*—and not just in the cognitive sense of "make known" or "disclose." "This same verb in v. 17 has a 'historical' sense: 'come into historical reality' (from the 'hiddenness' of God's purpose). It is probable that this is the meaning of the verb in v. 18 also," and so "'reveal' indicates the actual inflicting of God's wrath" (Moo, 101).

v. 18 **godlessness and** Some see a distinction in terms. "The object of the divine wrath is twofold—'all the godlessness and wickedness of men.' Paul explicates the first term in vv. 19-27 and the second in vv. 28-32. 'Godlessness' means a lack of reverence, an impiety that arrays man against God, not simply in terms of neglect but also of rebellion. 'Wickedness' means injustice, relating to the vitiating of man's conduct toward his fellows. The two together serve to denote the failure of mankind in terms of the requirements of the two tables of the Decalogue" (Everett F. Harrison, 10:22). Others do not. "'All impiety and unrighteousness of men,' is an all-embracing phrase . . . That Paul intends a clear distinction between the words is unlikely, as also the suggestion that he had in mind the two tables of the law . . . the phrase is comprehensive, not analytic" (James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38a, *Romans 1-8*, 55).

v. 18 **suppress** People refuse to admit the truth; what's more, their wickedness is contrary to the truth. So Paul can say that human beings "repress and hinder" (AMPC) the truth. We might put it this way, "human beings oppose the truth by their wickedness." "'Truth' in the NT is not simply something to which one must give mental assent; it is something to be done, to be obeyed. When people act sinfully, rebelling against God's just rule, they fail to embrace the truth and so suppress it" (Moo, 103).

v. 20 **since** Cf., "ever since the creation of the world" (ESV). The term has a *temporal* nuance. "Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen" (GNT). God's attributes that cannot be seen can, nevertheless, be known.

v. 20 **and divine nature** The Creator's power and deity are evident in creation. Put differently, the Intelligent Designer of creation is both powerful and God.

v. 20 **so that . . . for** In other words, God made his invisible qualities plain to mankind in creation. As a result, people are without excuse because they knew God but neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him (see Ac 17:25; cf. Mt 5:45). "Natural revelation leads not to salvation but to the demonstration that God's condemnation is just: people are 'without excuse'" (106).

v. 21 **For** Verse 21 explains why people are without excuse. "The outward manifestation of God in his created works was met with a real, though severely limited, knowledge of him among those who observed those works," and "the refusal of people to acknowledge and worship God (v. 21) explains why the revelation of God in nature (v. 20a) leads to their being 'without excuse' (v. 20b)" (106, 107).

v. 21 **futile** "Their thoughts have become complete nonsense and their empty minds are filled with darkness" (TEV). "The adjective rendered here 'empty' means 'stupid' or 'without understanding'" (Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 24).

v. 22 **images** "In modern times the western world has outgrown crass idolatry, but humanism has subtly injected the worship of man without the trappings. God is quietly ruled out and man is placed on the throne" (Harrison, 23, 24).

v. 23 **exchanged** The repeated use of "exchanges" and "hands them over" serves as a structural marker. In verses 21-24, people "exchange" the truth of God for idols, and God "hands them over." In verses 25-26a, people "exchange" the truth of God for a lie, and God "hands them over." And in verses 26b-31, people "exchange" natural sexual practices for the unnatural, and God "hands them over."

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

I didn't watch the Grammys last Sunday night. I'm not that into pop music so I am unfamiliar with the current music scene or the artists who were on the ballots. But almost 20 million other Americans tuned in. Many of those, I'm assuming were young adults who knew every word to every song. While such talent is to be appreciated, this admiration can easily turn into idolatry. As a teen in the '80's, with a life-sized poster of Kevin Bacon, I get it. With smaller children, it may not be music stars, but action heroes or cartoons. It could be a video game or an extracurricular activity that is consuming their attention. If you dare, ask your child what he couldn't live happily without. The answer may surprise you. The truth is we have all idols in our lives - things that we are putting our hope and affections on that are not God. The Israelites in the desert yielded to the temptation to worship the golden calf. The people Paul wrote about in our text today, exchanged the glory of God for man-made images. In 2018, we find our contentment and fulfillment in the things we have acquired. Parents, let's turn our affection back to God and allow our joy and worth to be found in Jesus alone. As we do, our kids will notice and be inclined to lay down their idols and focus on the One who is worthy of our worship.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Romans 1:18-23

1. What does wrath mean?
2. Why is God angry with those people?
3. According to verse 23, what did they exchange God's glory for?

What Do You Think

Read verse 20 again. What are some ways creation displays God's character? Read Genesis 1. Which creation are you especially thankful for?

What R U Going To Do

Are there things that are keeping you from spending time with God and in the Bible? Maybe it's a video game, or TV, or an activity. Give it up for a day and spend that time with God. How did you feel afterwards?

Core Comp

Humanity - I believe God loves everyone and we all need Jesus as Savior.

Memory Verse

Romans 2:7 - *To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.*

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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