

Of sin, the depravity of man, and the wrath of God (J. Peterson)

1. Examine Romans 1:21 within the context of its preceding verses. What do you observe?

"For even though they knew God," man **chose** not to honor Him as God, or be grateful. This is kind of surprising, isn't it? When someone says, "I don't believe in God," Paul says that they know God! They just don't want to know Him, or admit He exists. Paul also says that thankfulness is an issue. Admitting that there is a God means being grateful for life and for all His provisions, and that leads a person to wonder about God's claim on his life, something a person doesn't want to face. And so God's wrath from heaven, verse 18 is revealed against people who **know** the truth, but who refuse to acknowledge it.

And then people become "futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened" – the rest of verse 21. I think the King James says "vain in their imaginations." It means that people's reasonings and conclusions are futile – they are worthless and misleading. They are futile because they are based on a faulty premise – that there is no God worth honoring. If there is a God, and the disposition of your heart is to reject Him, then there is a basic disconnect between your reasoning and reality. Everyone knows that if you start with a faulty premise, you will come up with a faulty conclusion, no matter how brilliant you are! If you refuse to acknowledge facts that you know or suspect are true, you can hardly expect to come up with sound conclusions!

You see, it's not a matter of brilliant reasoning, of good education, or of high or low IQ. It's a matter of whether or not you have a prejudice to the facts! That's why people of high IQ and great education can be believers, and people of low IQ and poor education can be unbelievers, and vice versa. When it comes to the existence of God and acknowledging His absolute truth, there is a MORAL, SPIRITUAL PROBLEM! It's called sin. It has nothing to do with how smart or educated you are.

2. What patterns do you observe in Romans 1:22-32. What consequences do you see?

The problem starts with refusing to honor God, even though His existence and nature are plainly visible. This results in futile speculations and a darkening of the heart. In fact, in verse 22, we are called "fools." From the Old Testament, we know that the fool is not someone who is a clown or an idiot. The fool is the opposite of the wise person. To be a fool is to deny reality and refuse to acknowledge God. Paul says that there is considerable hypocrisy too, because we profess to be wise at the same time we refuse God! We even pretend that it is our great wisdom that leads us to reject God!

Now the next several verses can be looked at through two sets of words. The first is the word "exchanged," and it occurs in verses 23, 25, and 26. I underlined it each time. The next set is the phrase "God gave them over." It is in verses 24, 26, and 28. I underlined these too. In each case, man **exchanges** something good for something bad, and in each case, God "gives them over" to the result. Each exchange is an example of sin, and each "giving them over" is an example of God's wrath being revealed from heaven.

There is a lot of text here, and we will move faster, but I want you to see the flow: Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel. The Gospel involves God's wrath against man's sin. The heart of man's sin is his unwillingness to honor the God who reveals Himself in creation and in man's heart. The result is a spiral towards hell, in which each step is a revelation of God's wrath: "exchange, God gave them over, exchange, God gave them over, exchange, God gave them over."

The first exchange is in verse 23. "They exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image..." It's not that they "changed God's glory into an image," as some versions read. They **exchange it.** They traded it; they swapped it. And it's a pretty poor trade. In fact, it's an unspeakably bad trade. They substitute a genuine thing for a

Of sin, the depravity of man, and the wrath of God (page 2)

counterfeit. The counterfeit, of course, is an idol – some image of some man or animal, bird, insect or reptile. Idolatry is a flat out rejecting of the God of the universe and the testimony of Himself He has built into creation and into mankind.

Do you realize that this is the opposite of what is taught today about the “evolution” of religion? The story you are likely to hear at school, or read in a book, is that man started out by noticing some scary things in nature – lightning, thunder, earthquake, volcanoes, and decided that there must be some spiritual power behind them. In trying to bring these things under his control, man invented various religious rituals and mythologies. As man evolved upward, his religion gradually turned from pagan polytheism to monotheism, recognizing one god of some sort, until we came to the more “sophisticated” religions we have in the world today.

The biblical testimony is quite different. Man started out knowing the one true God of the universe, and in fact, man still knows of Him in his heart. As man sinned, and sin multiplied, his religion **devolved** into polytheistic paganism. We can see this happening in our own country in front of our eyes. As people in our culture reject the God of the universe and of the Bible, paganism is reappearing, and we have people seriously talking about witchcraft, spirits in houses, woods, and hills, the earth itself being a living being, and so on. People are substituting the glory of the incorruptible God for idolatry right before our faces. The idol is a monument to man’s flight from his knowledge of the glory of God.

There is a consequence for this. The first “God gave them over” phrase is in verse 24. God gave people over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity. “Impurity” means uncleanness in a moral sense. It would stand for all of the sins people do in and with their bodies, especially sexual sins. These are the things, which “dishonor their bodies,” as it says at the verse’s end.

Now when it says, “God gave them over,” it’s talking about a judgment of God, an expression or revelation of His wrath. It means that God deliberately let go of them, deliberately let them indulge their lusts and do whatever they wanted to do. This doesn’t necessarily mean that God’s Spirit no longer tried to call individual persons back to Himself. It simply means that He purposefully allowed man to pursue immorality. It’s as if He says, “OK, you refuse to honor me and you insist on indulging yourself. Go ahead and dishonor your body, and experience the result!” This is not out of spite, but out of His divine love and justice. And it’s frightening! This is God’s judgment!

The second “exchange” is in verse 25. They “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” It’s one thing to deny the existence of God. It’s another to worship something that He has made instead of Him! That’s a classic “adding insult to injury.”

The “lie” in this verse is anything that is worshiped instead of God. It’s broader than verse 23, which speaks of an “image.” I suspect that in context, the “lie” includes man’s worship of himself and his own desires and lusts.

The world of unbelief wants to say that the existence of God is a lie. The shoe is really on the other foot. The lie is what people have when they trade the truth of God for something else.

And once again, God’s response is that He “gave them over,” verse 26. In this case, He gave them over to degrading passions. The word “degrading” means lacking honor. To honor a person is to acknowledge his or her worth and give them the credit due their position or character. To dishonor a person is to do the opposite, failing to give the credit due. A passion that is “dishonorable,” then, is one that fails to give proper evaluation and credit to the design and purity and dignity of the body which God created. We are well aware of this principle, aren’t we? When people

Of sin, the depravity of man, and the wrath of God (page 3)

turn away from God and spiritual things, they seem quite vulnerable to sinking into sensual indulgence. This is precisely because God “gave them over” to it.

As an example of this, Paul describes another “exchange” at the end of verses 26 and 27.

Women, Paul says, “exchanged” the natural function for that which is unnatural. In verse 27, he says the same of men. By “natural,” Paul means “in accordance with what the Creator intended” and by “unnatural,” he means “contrary to what the Creator intended.” Of course, he is talking about homosexuality. That is, homosexual behavior. He is not addressing homosexual tendencies or temptations. The question of whether people have any genetic tendency toward homosexual desires, or whether it is exclusively environmental, is not pertinent to the context. (By the way, the reason that some people want to find a genetic basis is so that they can justify the behavior itself, as if our genes force us to take certain actions. We ought to challenge that assumption.)

I want you to see the parallels here, especially in light of the fact that homosexual-related issues are so much on the cultural agenda these days. The “exchange” in verse 23 is a good thing - the glory of God - for a bad thing, the idolatrous image. The “exchange” in verse 25 is a good thing - the truth of God - for a bad thing, a lie. The “exchange” in verse 26 is likewise a good thing - the natural sexual function, for a bad thing - the unnatural sexual function. Some people in the Christian community these days go to near desperate lengths to understand these verses in such a way that makes their homosexual practices legitimate. They say that Paul is only condemning homosexuality that is part of idol worship, or that Paul is only condemning nasty, lustful, promiscuous homosexuality, not the homosexuality of loving, committed relationships. The problem with their explanations is that they have nothing to do with the context! The context demands that this “exchange” be another example of the sin which flows out of refusing to acknowledge and honor the true God of the Bible and the universe!

Now you can disagree with the Bible is you like – no one forces you to accept it. You can disagree with God if you like, if you dare – it’s clear from the passage itself that you are free to do so. But do not try to make words, phrases, and passages mean what they clearly do not mean. Do not turn them on their heads. I suggest to you that it’s a far more honorable thing to say, “I disagree with that,” than to try and reinterpret it to mean what you would like it to mean!

Paul cites homosexuality here because it so clearly illustrates his point – men and women under sin not only deny God His existence and glory, they deliberately attempt to do the opposite of His intentions. I suspect that the thinking goes something like this: “I reject the Creator and any claims He might have on me. And because I do, I will not only feel free, but I will take satisfaction, in doing things that go against this supposed Creator’s design.” When men and women engage in homosexual activity, they are providing an outward sign of an inward rebellion against the Creator’s design. And, by the way, they are doing the same when they commit many other sins as well. We’ll see this in a moment.

Does this mean that homosexual activity is a particularly “bad” sin, compared to other sins? I doubt it. What it means is that homosexual acts provide a particularly vivid example of a terrible rebellion against God which lies in every person’s unsaved heart. We all have the same sin nature, and the only differences between us have to do with whether or not we have come to God’s Remedy, the Red page.

Now this brings us to the last “giving over,” in verse 28. The first “God gave them over,” verse 24, was to impurity. The next “God gave them over,” verse 26, was to degrading passions. This final “God gave them over,” verse 28, is to a depraved mind. Older versions say “a reprobate mind.” The word is literally “not approved.” It speaks of a mind

Of sin, the depravity of man, and the wrath of God (page 4)

that cannot stand trial, a mind that confuses right and wrong, a mind that is completely untrustworthy to be a guide in moral and spiritual decisions. By saying that God “gave them over” to this, Paul is indicating, once again, that God deliberately lets the consequence of rebellion against Him be a depraved mind. He abandons men to this condition as an expression of His wrath against sin.

Did you notice the words at the beginning of the verse? People do not “see fit to acknowledge God.” They don’t think it’s worth the trouble. Paul again portrays man’s rebellion against God as a deliberate affront. People put God to their own tests, and then decide that He’s not what they want. In other words, the error that people make when they reject God is not accidental. It’s not even an error flowing out of logical reasoning. It’s a deliberate evaluation of what it’s worth to know God, and then a rejection of Him.

So God gives them over to a whole host of sins flowing out of a depraved mind. All of them, of course, are contrary to His will and design. These are listed in verses 29-31. Two things interest me about this list. First, it’s interesting to me that when we think of Romans 1, we tend to think of the matter of idolatry, and homosexuality, and we tend to ignore this overwhelming list of other sins. Could it be that we have seen idolatry and homosexuality as really big sins, just because we think that *other* people do them, but not us? And second, it’s interesting, it’s dismaying actually, to see the things that are lumped into this list. I can see, for instance, why Paul would put murder in here, but “unmerciful?” Is it really a sin to lack mercy? Hmm. And malice – I can see where malice should be here. But gossip? Disobedient to parents? Really? Could it be that I don’t take some sins seriously enough?

Then I read verse 32, and I feel relieved a bit. It looks like Paul is really concerned about those who cheer sinners on, and I don’t do that! Yes, I understand the flow of the passage. Yes, mankind has rejected God and therefore experiences God’s wrath as He gives people over to their sins. And yes, maybe, now and again, I do a little of one or two of the sins at the end of the list. But overall, I’m OK.

I want to warn you about something. This chapter is really like a giant sting operation. It is leading up to a great big “therefore.” Somewhere along the way, someone put a chapter division here, but there is no break in where Paul is going. Chapter 2, verse 1, says “THEREFORE!” Here I am, seeing God’s judgment and wrath on all these terrible people, and privately excluding myself. And then this verse hits: “You are without excuse!” Who, me? “Every one of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself, for you who judge practice the same things.” Me? Pretty good, fairly decent and moral me? Not just the idolaters and other sinners, but me? “Yes,” Paul says, “You!”

In fact, as Paul moves on through Romans 2 and 3, he shows how even God’s chosen people from the Old Testament, the Jews, are guilty, until he comes to Romans 3:23, where we find the absolute, undeniable, universal condemnation of every man, woman, and child who has ever lived on this planet. “For ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

Does that mean me? Yup. Does that mean you? Yes. What about the person who says, “I don’t think I can believe in a God like that?” Yes, him too. What about the idolater? Yes. The homosexual? Yes. The gossip? Yes. The slanderer? Yes. The one who disobeys parents? Yes. The arrogant? Yes. The greedy? Yes. We are all sinners, under the wrath of God which is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

That’s Man’s Problem, that’s the Black page of the Wordless book.

Of sin, the depravity of man, and the wrath of God (page 5)

We all have something tragically in common. In our deepest hearts, we don't want to acknowledge, honor, or obey the God of the universe and the Bible. And so, the Bible says, we are worthy of death (see verse 32). Not just physical death, the rest of Romans goes on to say, but spiritual death – eternal separation from the God we are so desperately trying to avoid.

But that's not the end of the Gospel. The Gospel is good news. It is the power of God, verse 16, for **salvation** to **everyone** who believes. Just as there is an "all" with the Problem, with the Black page, there is an "everyone" to the red page. **Everyone** who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, accepting as for their own benefit the death of Christ on the cross for their sins, will be saved, and enjoy a life of fellowship and growth in a permanent relationship with God. A relationship that extends all the way into heaven, where there will be no more sin and rebellion. A relationship open to the one who said "I refuse to acknowledge God," to the one who used to be an idolater, to the one who used to commit sexual sins, to the one who used to be greedy, to the one who used to be a murderer, to everyone who believes. I pray that it is your relationship too.

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