

The Dark Exchange

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Date: 10 October 2010

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I want to invite you to turn to Romans chapter 1, verses 18 through 32, and you can find that in these new pew Bibles that were handed out to you.

And they're not handed out to you, they're in your pews, actually. And you can find that right away on page 939. Page 939.

This is a great day that we have today. And unlike the 9 o'clock service, we actually have sun. What a surprise. It was quite dark at 9. And it's a great day, not only because of the weather, also because of the baptism that we have seen, and also because this is a great passage as well, this passage from Romans.

I was talking to the reader of this passage at 9 o'clock, and she said she was practicing the reading during the week, and her husband said, My goodness, who has to preach on that passage?

I said, I do. It is a passage that's difficult, not because it's complex or obscure, but because it's so clear.

[1 : 0 6] It is a crucial passage because in it we see the spiritual diagnosis of the world. And it is a diagnosis, as you can see, that's grim. It's somewhat hard to hear because it tells us what is wrong with the world.

But it is true. And by hearing the truth, people can really look at the reality of the cure that Romans is all about, that it reveals to us as we go through chapter by chapter.

None of us want to hear bad news. But when you are talking to a doctor or a lawyer or a financial planner, even though it's hard to hear bad news, you actually want to hear the truth.

Even if it's difficult, it's because it's the only way that your true situation can be addressed. I don't know if you've been following the news at all, but if you do, you cannot miss this extraordinary thing that is happening in Chile with the miners who are trapped far below the Earth's surface.

They've been trapped for 66 days now. And when the miners were first found, it was 17 days after the initial collapse, the miners thought that rescue would happen right away.

[2 : 2 8] But the rescuers knew the full extent of their problem. They knew that it was a huge collapse and it would take up to three months to get these miners out.

And so there was great debate about when should we tell the miners the truth of their situation? How specific should we be? Of course, they had to tell them right away.

They had to be specific right away so that these miners could know their plight and be prepared for the rescue that would come. They would have to organize their time.

They'd have to exercise so they'd be fit for the rescue and also to be able to not gain too much weight. So they can fit in these rescue capsules that will be used, these pods.

There was great worry as to how the miners would receive this news, this bad news. But, you know, they received it really well. In fact, there were two things that happened, even though it was hard for them to hear it.

[3 : 28] The first thing was that they became clear about their mission and really focused on cooperating with this massive rescue effort. And the second thing that happened is they really rejoiced in the rescue and the certainty of it.

They rejoiced that so much effort was going into their rescue from all over the world and how everyone from Chile is empathetic and praying and thinking about them.

And so they have gone through this time joyfully, even though it is very, very difficult being there. And I think that the diagnosis of our passage today does the same things for us as we're listening to it.

It is grim news about the fundamental problem in the world, but it makes us understand our mission. It tells us that the good news we have is crucial to the well-being of the world and that it's urgent for us to share it.

But secondly, like with the miners, it helps us to live for that good news, to rejoice in it, to have our lives shaped and changed and transformed by the certainty of God's rescue for us through the good news.

[4 : 44] And so this is what we, when we come up to this passage, when you read it, we are being given this incredibly important diagnosis. When you first read the passage, you might think, well, the problem is human sin.

And you have this awful list that in humility, we must be able to say, I take part in that list. You know, I am one of the sinful people. And so we look at that and we think, well, maybe it's the problem of humanity is human sin.

And this is very true. But the diagnosis is much deeper than that. Look at verse 18. It shows us the full extent of the dilemma of humanity.

It says the wrath of God has been revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people. And what Paul is saying in that phrase is that the problem is not just humanity's evil and sin.

It is God. God is the problem in the sense that it is his wrath and fury against sin and evil that is revealed. If Paul were just talking about humanity's sin, we might think there is a human solution.

[5 : 57] But God's word says here that God's power in wrath is directed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people. Everyone, excluding no one, everyone, therefore, is subject to God's wrath.

And we are helpless to do anything about that power. That is the full extent of the problem. And it's very important for us that we understand this because then we can see why the solution that God gives is so powerful and wonderful and loving.

And that is by nature a rescue. That's why if you look back in verse chapter one, verse one, that the good news of rescue is called the gospel of God.

And in verse nine, it is called the gospel of his son. It is God's gospel. It has to be his good news. And in verse nine, the good news is called the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

The problem is with God and that solution must come from God in his power because it's the only way to deal with the power of God's wrath. Well, we need to know something about God's wrath.

[7 : 14] What do we know from the Bible throughout the Old Testament? What we understand is that the Bible teaches that the wrath of God will be fully revealed on a future day at the end of human history called the day of the Lord.

And Paul agrees. He echoes this. If you just turn the page for a moment, chapter two, verse five. We hear.

But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgments will be revealed.

There is this final day in the future when God's wrath will be revealed against all sin with righteous judgment. His absolute goodness will prevail on that day and he will condemn all that is evil, everything that is opposed to God.

Now, all of us, in one sense, want this. We earnestly desire it. We want God to be absolutely good and to have authority over everything that is wrong in our world.

[8 : 22] We have all experienced injustice in our life against us. And the wrong has not been righted. It has not been made right. And if you read the news or hear it every day, we see things that we want changed.

We see victims of violence and oppression. We want justice. We see hunger and grief. We see we see terrible human deprivation.

And we want good to take over in those people's lives. Our sense of judgment says that evil must be punished. It must end. And thankfully, in God, it will end.

His wrath and his judgment guarantee it. However, we also know we have participated in some way in the world's evil. We have all lived in opposition to God.

This is the humbling truth that we hear from this. That's what ungodliness is in verse 18. And so God's judgment and his wrath must be against each one of us as well.

[9 : 25] Nobody in the human race is immune from this. Everyone is included. C.S. Lewis writes about this in Mere Christianity.

And it's in a chapter called We Have Cause to Be Uneasy, which is a very good title for that chapter. He says this. He says, God is the only comfort.

He is also the supreme terror. The thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from. He is our only possible ally. And we have made ourselves his enemies.

Some talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again. They are still only playing with religion. Goodness is either the great safety or the great danger according to the way you react to it.

And we have reacted the wrong way. Well, how has humanity reacted the wrong way? Paul tells us at the end of verse 18. He says that they suppress the truth.

[10 : 30] And what this means is that every person in the world and every generation has known about God. And they have literally pressed that truth down to hide it and not to deal with it.

In verse 20, Paul says this. He says, God's eternal power and his divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made.

So, they, humanity, all of us are without excuse. Now, today is Thanksgiving Sunday. And there is a great collect in the prayer book, especially for today.

We're going to read it together at the end of the service. But in that prayer, there is a wonderful line that says, We give thanks for all that is beautiful in creation and in the lives of people.

And this is what Paul is talking about here in verse 20. There is goodness and beauty in creation. Do we ever see it on a day like today when the sun's out in Vancouver? And I hope you experience also great beauty in the lives of people as well, in your relationships with others.

[11 : 39] Today, we saw a beautiful thing. We saw a baby being baptized. And we saw a baby that is a gift from God. Somebody that is fearfully and wonderfully created.

And you can't look at that and not think, who is behind this? My Jewish neighbor often says to his non-believing friends, How can you look at flowers and children and not believe that there is a God?

He's right. Paul says, All of humanity has seen God's goodness and power in creation. And they have known, therefore, that God is all-powerful and all-good. Now, Paul's not talking there about salvation.

He's not talking about the knowledge that brings salvation, the knowledge of the good news of Jesus. But he is talking about knowledge that says to each person, There is a God, and I am his creature.

As Calvin says, Eyes were given to him, to each person, That he might, by looking at so beautiful a picture, Be led up to the author himself.

[12 : 46] That has happened with everybody, Paul says. But verse 21 tells us what has gone wrong. It talks about how humanity suppresses the truth of God.

It says there in verse 21, 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.

Now, what this is saying is that all that is wrong with the world Stems from this failure to give honor and to give thanks to God. It's very appropriate that we're reading this on Thanksgiving Day. But the question is, how can this be?

How can all the problems of the world stem from the fact that humanity does not give thanks? And the reason is because that not giving thanks expresses and reveals The fundamental breakdown in God's plan for creation.

Every person was created to thank God, to honor him. Every person was created to depend upon him for their breath, for their life, for everything that they need.

[14 : 00] And today on Thanksgiving, I hope that all of us know this and believe this and receive it. That's why Christian prayers begin with thanks and praise. That's why our singing reflects that praise and thanksgiving.

It's fundamental to the whole relationship that we have with God. A right relationship. But contrary to this, we hear in that little verse that humanity becomes futile in their thinking.

Literally, Paul is saying they become worthless in their reasoning. Their reasoning becomes nonsense. And their foolish hearts are darkened. And that's really, literally, the heart of the problem.

When humans refuse to honor and thank God, the place where God is meant to be, in the very depth, the center of who we are, is darkened. They are dark in their relationship to God.

They separate themselves from him. And what they think and talk about God bears no resemblance to the true God. Even though it all might seem very, very wise to them.

[15 : 07] And we hear many wise pronouncements of God and religion in the media, in the world around us. Very wise things. But they are foolish in God's sight, bearing no resemblance to God.

In fact, what happens with humanity is inevitably, Paul says, they create a God or a religion that is false.

So look at verse 23. This is why Paul writes, 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.

And then if you jump down to verse 25, because they exchanged truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever?

Who is meant to be blessed and honored and praised forever? The very opposite happens. Exchanging the truth of God for a lie. And what Paul is doing here is he's making a devastating assessment on religion.

[16 : 14] He is saying that all religions created by humanity are not actually reaching towards the truth of God. They are actually taking people further and further away from God.

It is an exchange, he says, of the glory of the immortal God with a lie. If any man-made religion comes up, it will surely deceive ourselves.

You see, God created humanity to worship him. And when they don't worship the true God, they will find another God to worship. One that they create and one that they control.

Now, you might say, wait a minute. We've moved beyond idol worship that is being described here, the worshiping of the creature. We've moved beyond religions that you can make like that.

But humanity is very good at creating idols. You and I are good at it. Calvin says that we are idol factories. He says, and every person, it is because in our hearts we need someone or something to put our trust in.

[17 : 20] We need to have a purpose in our life, meaning for our life. And so idolatry means looking to something or someone who can give you the kind of hope and safety that only God can give.

It could be materialism or moral accomplishments or sex. You see it happening when you love anything more than God. When your security is something else.

When your value is in someone or something else other than God's love for you. You're looking at the created thing instead of the creator.

And what happens as a result of this worshiping the creature rather than the creator is that God's intent for all of his creation is deeply distorted.

Human relationships unravel and they break down because the relationship with God is essential for whole and healthy relationships.

[18 : 17] Human relationships is what we need to be human. Human relationships is what we need to be really human. Human relationships is what we need to be human. Now what God does in this passage is to reveal the wrath of the last day as he hands people over.

So now we get taste of the wrath of the last day as God allows people by their choices to go into broken relationships.

And experience what it's like to be given over to that. and the first two examples of relationships that are broken down and distorted have to do with sexuality in verse 24 god gave people up it says there in the lust of their hearts to impurity to uncleanness and the dishonor of their bodies we know from genesis that sexuality is a gift from god in which a man and a woman become one they express their loyalty and the love of god there is a permanence to that and his faithfulness the god's faithfulness is shown in the marriage and there is this following of god's command to multiply but paul here is saying that people choose by their dishonored passions to go another way to not choose god's way and sexuality becomes a path to dishonoring the body rather than honoring god to choose sexual relationships that are outside what god has created and ordained and given as a gift to his creation there is a real distortion of worship here and certainly today we see this when sexual brokenness and pain is widespread and epidemic in our society that's why living waters is so important it's a ministry that we support at saint john's because it is a ministry that promotes true worship of god so that people can know his healing from the pain of relationships that have gone wrong to know uh those relationships to be made whole and right and your relationship with god healed as well and we see a further example of this kind of sexual brokenness in verse 27 and 28 god again gives people up to their own dishonorable passions he calls it that again they replace natural sexual relationships that god has created with sexual relationships that are not according to god's creative word from genesis so men and men and women choose to engage in same sex relationships and of course in our society there's a very strong movement to say that this is natural and good and blessed by god but god's word says the very opposite it says homosexuality is contrary to nature and what it means by that it is to live in this way violates god's clear purpose for sexuality in creation it is again the very opposite of worshiping god the true god god it is a false way of being in relationship with god and then finally in verse 28 as people refuse to acknowledge the true god with their mind god gives them up it says and there to a debased mind and here again we see relationships that are distorted from god's good order they are relationships that permeate all of life all of our lives and if you look at that awful list in verses 29 to 31 you see you see 21 examples of disordered relationships between people it's awful to read because it is all about attitudes of the mind and of the heart that tear down people that tear down relationships and the humbling thing as i said earlier is that every person including you and i can look at that list and recognize something that we have done that we are involved in and according to verse 32 all who practice such things deserve to die to be cut off from god there is the grim diagnosis uh it is crystal clear for us that's that's the problem of this passage it says that every person both jews and greeks are under sin's power uh humans all participate in

ungodliness and unrighteousness every person in every generation has rejected the creator and worship the creature creature even though they knew better and that is why god's powerful wrath is directed against all humanity and the reality of the day of wrath at the end of time is really seen now in destructive relationships that god hands people over as they choose that path it is grim but you know that diagnosis is a great gift for us because only then can we see how powerful and loving and wonderful god's solution is for the world and that solution is that god does not rest with this wrath that is hanging over everyone in creation he doesn't rest instead what he does in his love he sends jesus christ to rescue us from god's wrath and so i want to close by looking at a bible verse first john 4 10 and that bible verse which is right at the end of the bible on page one zero two three uh is the gospel it is a wonderful thing for us to read first john 4 10 on page 10 23 i'd like you to turn there so that we can read 10 and 11 together first john 4 10 and 11 uh please join me in this is love not that we have loved god but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins beloved if god so loved us we also ought to love one another now because we have heard this this at this passage we can understand uh this verse far better i'm pretty confident uh that the word propitiation does not come up in your conversation every week in fact even in a minister's home where it's it's very hard work to try to put that into a sentence it is something that we hear every other sunday at communion but it's an important word because it means uh literally here's what it means it means a gift that appeases the wrath of a god that's what propitiation is it's a gift that appeases the wrath of a god and it's saying here that jesus is our propitiation because on the cross jesus absorbed the wrath of god against our sin and he absorbs that wrath on our behalf so that as we trust him for this gift we will not face god's wrath but instead we will have peace with god and so the day of the lord for us is that it's a final day of salvation that awaits each each of us instead of a day of wrath for our sin here is the love of god that is so powerful and so perfect it is very hard to take in we can't as one preacher said god's love does not cancel his justice but finds a way to be both just and justifier that is the way of the cross and you know wonderfully about that verse from first john is it translates into action if god has so loved us let us love one another it moves the church to mission and that's what romans does for us it moves us to mission because it tells us the predicament of a world that is under god's wrath wrath because of sin and wonderfully it tells us that the church has the cure in the treasure of god's gospel in the good news of jesus coming as the propitiation for sin and this is something that ought

to move us to live for that rescue it gives us a sense of urgency about the world and it actually calls us to look for and to pray for opportunities to bring that good news of jesus into the world it is a solution to this terrible diagnosis and so our prayer this morning is that god would grant us his holy spirit so that we might love the world in this way and that our lives are transformed each day by this rescue this glorious rescue that jesus and his love has given to us um the the gospel is god's power self to salvation may we as a church be good stewards of that gift in jesus name amen