

A Study in the Book of Romans

7

Romans 1:18-32

Key Verse

“ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ”

With this lesson, we leave behind Paul’s introduction and enter the heart of his message. Having summarized his theme in **1:16-17**, Paul now begins to develop it. In the verses between **1:18** and **4:25** he presents the foundation of the Gospel, revealing the three main aspects of truth that are the basis of the Gospel’s message:

- ➔ A revelation of God (**1:18-2:16**)
- ➔ A revelation of man (**1:18-3:19**)
- ➔ A revelation of righteousness by faith (**3:20-4:25**)

Interweaving them together, Paul begins by revealing the nature and character of God as contrasted with the nature and character of man. Then, as now, men had developed many pet ideas of God, usually fitting him comfortably into their way of life so as to avoid too much demand to change. But it is only as we see what God is really like that we become aware of what we are like, and of our desperate need to be changed.

The Bible first reveals God as the “God of Light”(1 **John 1:5**) before it reveals Him as the “God of Love” (1 **John 4:8**).

Introduction

The Gospel’s Three Revelations

The Gospel’s Three Answers

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

In the dark, the dust and dirt in a house may not be too noticeable, but as soon as the light is turned on, it can be seen very clearly. So it is with God and us. We may feel we are quite a “good” person, but stand us next to God’s goodness and holiness, and suddenly the “good” in us seems very little while all our faults and failings become very clear. Isaiah’s description of ancient Israel’s condition, in **Isaiah 64:6**, applies even more to the Gentile world:

“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...”

So Paul begins by first of all revealing God. The contrast to man is so great that it acts as a bright light revealing man’s sinfulness. From these two facts he then moves on to show the impossibility of man, in such a degraded condition, ever being able to find righteousness by his own efforts. He had to have help from outside himself. From this premise, Paul then brings the revolutionary truth of the Gospel – that righteousness can be found through faith in the work of someone else – Jesus Christ.

A Revelation of God

Moving on from what he has just declared in **1:16-17** – that God’s righteousness is revealed to man through faith – Paul contrasts this by stating that the opposite is also true – God’s anger is revealed to all those who know the truth of God but disobey it. He goes on to enlarge on this thought in **1:18-32**, showing that all men have some revelation of God, and all have turned against it to go their own way.

If you wanted to describe to someone what a friend looked like, there are three methods you could use. First of all, you could describe him in words, and the one listening would have to use his imagination to picture what my friend was like. Or, secondly, if you were a good artist, you could draw a sketch of him. That would give a better idea of what he was like, though it would still be only a limited likeness. But the third way would leave no doubt. You could show him a photograph. Then the other person would see your friend as he really is.

This analogy pictures for us how God has used three methods to reveal himself to a human race totally out of contact with him because of sin.

The creation (like descriptive words)

Psalm 19:1-4 tells us:

“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 display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

The Law (like a limited sketch)

Psalm 119:129-130 proclaims:

“Your statutes are wonderful, therefore I obey them. The entrance of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.”

But this “light” and “understanding” given by the Law did not reveal the fullness of God, as the New Testament declares **Matthew 13:16-17**:

“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

Read 1 Peter 1:10-12.

Jesus Christ (the perfect photograph)

Read 2 Corinthians 4:6

J. B. Phillips translates this verse with these words:

“God, who first ordered light to shine in darkness, has flooded our hearts with his light. We now can enlighten men only because we can give them knowledge of the glory of God, as we see it in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Jesus Christ is the image of God, the Father, to the world. He is the “exact representation” of God’s being (**Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15-19**). When Philip asked the Lord Jesus to show him the Father and then he would be satisfied, Jesus declared in **John 14:9-10**:

“...Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?...”

In **Romans 1**, Paul begins by showing how God has revealed himself through the things he has created. The invisible qualities of God are made evident to all mankind through the visible things he has made (**1:20**). All men are included here; but in particular, Paul is referring to the Gentiles. In **chapter 2** he will speak specifically to the Jews who prided themselves in their knowledge of God through the Law – and he will show them that they are judged guilty by that very Law. But his main premise in **verses 1:18-32** is that mankind has rejected even the revelation of God that has been given to them through creation. For this reason, they are without excuse – and God’s righteous anger is upon them (**verses 18,32**).

Psalms 14:1 declares:

“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

But the term “fool” in Hebrew, used in this psalm, doesn’t mean so much someone who is ignorant, but someone who is “morally deficient.” Indeed, Paul paints the picture vividly in **Romans 1** – moral deficiency and the rejection of the knowledge of God are intimately linked.

God Revealed in Creation

When we look at a painting we can see the personality of the artist expressed. In the same way, God's personality is painted into his masterpiece – creation. As the psalmist declares in **Psalm 19:1-3**:

“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 display knowledge...”

Creation reveals three things about God:

His eternal power (verse 20)

Creation is a demonstration of God's might and power. The wonders of the universe – the myriads of stars and galaxies; the earth with its mountains and valleys, oceans and waterfalls, and all its teeming life – all stand as a testimony to the incredible power of their Creator. And this power is eternal. In other words, God's power was not just expressed at the time of actual creation, but continues to be demonstrated as he maintains it all in perfect harmony. **Hebrews 1:1-3** tells us:

“God...in these last days...has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is...sustaining all things by his powerful word.”

Read also Colossians 1:17

His divine nature (verse 20)

His divine nature is revealed through creation. Only a Being with unlimited power (**Job 42:2; Jeremiah 32:17**), unlimited knowledge (**Isaiah 46:10; Psalm 147:5**), and with the ability to be everywhere at once (**Psalm 139:7-12; Jeremiah 23:23-24**) could create the universe which we see and know.

Read Job 38-39

In these two chapters, God describes his own power and glory which he has demonstrated in his creation. In fact, **Isaiah 6:3** tells us:

“...the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Did you notice what Isaiah says? The whole earth is *full* of his glory! How is it full of his glory? Take a look out your window. Take a look, if you can, at the splendor of God's creation – the trees, the grass, the flowers, the clouds upon the sky, the pounding of the sea, the majestic ranges of mountains. That is the glory of God, expressed in his creation. Yet most people walk around with eyes shut to the glory that is revealed around them.

Pictures in Creation

Many times in the Scripture, the visible things of creation are used as pictures to describe God.

Read Genesis 1:14

When God created the sun, moon and stars, he created them “for signs and seasons” (NKJV). These celestial objects were created not only as pointers marking out the seasons, but also as pointers toward God himself. Let’s take a look at the picture provided by the sun, moon and stars.

The sun

Read Malachi 4:2

Read Psalm 84:11

The sun serves as a picture of God the Father. The sun is the earth’s source of light. When it rises each morning, the darkness disappears. J. B. Phillips renders **1 John 1:5** as:

“God is light and no shadow of darkness can exist in him.”

All life on earth is sustained by the light of the sun (**Acts 17:24-25**). No one is able to look directly into the full light of the sun without being blinded. This is also a picture of the glory of God, for the Lord told Moses in **Exodus 33:20**:

“You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

Read Isaiah 60:19-20

Read Revelation 21:23

The moon

The moon serves as a picture of God the Son (**Revelation 21:23**). It shines in the darkness. Speaking of the Lord Jesus, John writes in **John 1:4-9**:

“In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

Jesus Christ came as a light shining in a world full of the darkness of sin. He said, “I am the light of the world” (**John 8:12**).

The moon is also a marred object. Huge craters, caused by the bombardment of giant meteorites, have greatly disfigured the surface of the moon. The prophet Isaiah, in **Isaiah 52:14**, described Jesus when he was crucified:

“Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness...”

The moon acts like a mirror reflecting the light of the sun, so when we see the moon shining at night, we are actually looking at the sun’s light shining on it. We cannot bear to look at the light of the sun, but we can see its light in the moon at night. This beautifully illustrates the ministry of Christ as “the light of the world.” Because of the darkness of sin in the human heart, no one was able to see God, for it would have destroyed him. But Jesus came in human form to reflect God’s

glory to us so that, looking at Him, we can see God the Father. This is beautifully described for us in **2 Corinthians 4:4-6**:

“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God...For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God *in the face of Christ*.”

And once again, in **John 1:18**, the Scripture declares:

“No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.”

Finally, the book of **Revelation** describes how God uses the moon as a special sign to men. **Revelation 6:12** says that the moon turns red like blood. This also is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ and the blood he shed on the Cross for us.

The stars

The Bible likens God's people to stars (see **Genesis 22:17**; **Revelation 1:20**). Abraham was promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the earth. The people of Israel are his natural descendants (like the sand on the earth). But **Galatians 3:7,16,29** tells us that all those who are in Christ are the spiritual children of Abraham (like the stars in the sky).

Stars are millions upon millions of lights. Like the moon, they shine in the darkness. In **Matthew 5:14**, Jesus said to all who believe in him:

“You are the light of the world.”

As Paul puts it in **Philippians 2:14-15**:

“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.”

Stars, then, are a picture of the Holy Spirit indwelling all who believe in Christ.

The Glory of the Immortal God

Read Romans 1:21-23

The magnificence of the creation – its beauty and colour – depicts the wonder and splendor of the God who made it. In **Ezekiel 1:26-28**, the prophet describes the glory of God by comparing it to God's creation. Take a look at his description:

“Above the expanse...was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”

So, we see, not only does creation declare God's power and greatness, but it serves as a viable picture to help us understand what God is like.

The Human Heart Revealed

Read again Romans 1:18

In his introduction to the revelation of God's glory, Paul shares a secondary revelation – the revelation of man's depraved condition. Paul's verdict is severe:

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

He then shows how mankind has some understanding of God through creation (1:19-20). Even though this revelation is limited, it does reveal his existence and demonstrates his power and glory. Paul then declares that mankind is held responsible before God for what is revealed to them. They are obligated to honor and serve God according to what they know.

But here is the problem. Man has totally rejected what is clearly revealed to him, and has turned away from God to worship idols of his own making. He has no excuse for turning from his Creator. This is why “[t]he wrath of God is being revealed from heaven” (1:18,21-23).

According to **Romans 1:18**, mankind's sin is expressed in two ways:

- **Godlessness** – a deliberate turning from God
- **Wickedness** – evil acts resulting from being away from God

Let's take a look at these two expressions of sin.

Godlessness

Godlessness is exactly what it means – the state of being “God-less”. In **Romans 1:18,21-23**, we see the four steps down to the condition of being totally “without hope and without God in the world” (**Ephesians 2:12**). Paul tells us that mankind has:

Suppressed the truth (verse 18)

Despite all that God has clearly revealed of himself through his creation, people have deliberately turned away from him. Their knowledge of God comes not only from the outward evidence of creation, but also from an instinctive knowledge put within their hearts by God himself. The phrase “since what may be known about God is plain to them,” in 1:19, can also be translated “is plain *within* them.”

Of all physical creation, man is the only being who desires to worship. But instead of worshiping the true God, he has chosen to follow his own desires and ideas.

Become ungrateful (verse 21)

Coupled with their refusing to acknowledge what they know of God, people have refused to thank God for all the good things he has given them to enjoy in cre-

ation, or to glorify him for all things he has made.

Acts 14:15-18 records how the people of Lystra tried to worship Paul and Barnabas after a crippled man had been healed at the word of Paul. They thought two of their gods had come down in human form. When Paul and Barnabas realize what is happening, they are horrified. Luke relates what happens next:

“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ‘Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.’ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.”

Ungratefulness for God’s daily mercies is the second step in the downward spiral of godlessness.

Become spiritually blind (verse 21)

The result of suppressing what they know to be true of God through creation, and showing ingratitude for what’s around them, is they have become spiritually blind. In fact, Paul describes this blindness in this way:

“...their thinking became *futile* and their foolish hearts were *darkened*.”

Look at how various other translations render Paul’s words:

- **Young’s Literal Translation** – “[they] were made vain in their reasonings, and their unintelligent heart was darkened.”
- **New Century Version** – “Their thinking became useless. Their foolish minds were filled with darkness.”
- **New Living Translation** – “And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused.”
- **American Standard Bible** – “[they] became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened.”
- **Darby’s New Translation** – “[they] fell into folly in their thoughts, and their heart without understanding was darkened.”
- **International Standard Version** – “...their thoughts turned to worthless things, and their ignorant hearts were darkened.”
- **King James Version** – “[they] became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.”
- **The New Testament in Modern English** – “...they became fatuous in

their argumentations, and plunged their silly minds still further into the dark.”

- ☛ **The Amplified Bible** – “...they became futile and godless in their thinking – with vain imaginings, foolish reasoning and stupid speculations – and their senseless minds were darkened.”

What all these translations reflect is the utter foolishness of man’s plunge into spiritual darkness. In fact, the word translated “futile” or “vain” has the root meaning of “empty, profitless” and is used to describe curdled milk.

Because they “suppressed the truth,” people started making up their own ideas about life and God. They thought they were wise, but all the time they were being foolish.

J. B. Phillips, in *The New Testament in Modern English*, translates **Ephesians 4:18** in this way:

“...Do not live any longer as the gentiles live. For they live blindfold in a world of illusion, and are cut off from the life of God through ignorance and insensitiveness.”

Read 1 Corinthians 1:19-25

Turned to other gods (verse 23)

The final step in mankind’s downward path is idolatry. They made images of human and animal forms, and attributed divine power to something made by their own hands (see **Exodus 20:3-6; Psalm 115:4-8**). This is what causes God’s anger. But there are many other kinds of idols that men can worship. In **Ephesians 5:5-6**, Paul writes:

“For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – *such a man is an idolater* – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.”

The basic sin of idolatry is selfishness. A man brings offerings and prayers to an idol because he hopes that his own desires and plans will be blessed. His worship is for his own sake – not the idol’s! Once we understand this, we realize that anything that holds our devotion and attention to meet a selfish desire, and steals that devotion from God, is an idol!

Wickedness

Read Romans 1:24-32

The result of man’s godlessness is described in **verse 24**:

“Therefore God *gave them over* [to] the sinful desires of their hearts...”

They had given up on God, so now God gives them up. God does not encourage evil (**James 1:13-15**). What Paul means in this verse is that God stopped re-

straining them. He left them to their own devices (note **Genesis 6:3**).

God gave mankind over to their own evil desires for two reasons:

- Firstly, God had given man a free will, and for this reason he chooses not to interfere with man's choices (**Ephesians 4:19**) – even though he holds man accountable for his actions.
- Secondly, by letting people have exactly what they wanted, mankind reaped its own punishment. The natural outcome of sin is always suffering. Every evil act that is listed in **verses 24-32** brings suffering, both to the sinner and to others, since people are continually sinning against one another.

In fact, there are three times in this passage where Paul says “God gave them over.” God gave mankind over to:

Sinful desires (verse 24)

Mankind had dishonored God (**verse 25**). Now they dishonored each other by sexual impurity.

Shameful lusts (verse 26-27)

People degraded themselves with indecent acts of homosexuality. There is no greater slavery for man than to be given up to his own lusts (**John 8:34**).

A depraved mind (verses 28-32)

Their mind was totally void of all discernment or moral sense, so they were left to their evil imaginations and thoughts, and these produced every kind of wickedness “forever inventing new ways of sinning” (NLT).

And so we see, in this first chapter of **Romans**, the deplorable condition of mankind without God. Man's godlessness results in a life brimming full of wickedness. But it was into this world that Jesus Christ came with the Gospel – the power of God for *salvation!*