



ROMANS

.....
MICHAEL KASTING

LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY

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Living Way Bible Study, Inc.

info4LWBS@aol.com

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Our purpose is to help equip believers to live joyfully in God's redeeming love and to share with others God's plan of salvation.

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will use this study to help you grow in your knowledge and appreciation of our God and His Word. *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."* 2 Peter 3:18

STUDY STRUCTURE

LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY SUGGESTS THIS FOUR-STEP METHOD

- 1. PERSONAL** – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P.A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
- 2. SMALL GROUPS** – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P.A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
- 3. THE MESSAGE** – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
- 4. THE NARRATIVE** – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P.A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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ROMANS

MICHAEL KASTING

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

MICHAEL KASTING

LWBS Courses: *Book of Romans* – 2016

Acts – 2017

Graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis – 1972

Forty-three years of ministry with LCMS serving the following congregations:

Memorial, Vancouver, WA

Concordia, Akron, OH

Faith, Sequim, WA

Trinity, Oregon City, OR

Trinity, Casey, IL

Served as vicar supervisor, circuit counselor, spiritual growth workshop leader, and writer for several publications

Published three books:

Time and Grace – A Pastor's Story

Blood and Life – Sermons on the Old Testament

Through the Needle's Eye: Sermons on the Gospels

Short-term mission in Kyrgyzstan, 2006

Retired from ministry in 2015

LWBS editor for several courses

Married to Sue (Rodebaugh) in 1968. Have three adult children and seven grandchildren

Enjoys traveling, gardening, hiking, reading, singing in church choir

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An adventure this certainly will be! Not merely mind-filling, we hope, but life-changing and faith-deepening as well. The investment of your best effort will yield dividends during this study and in the years thereafter.

• • •

GETTING OUR BEARINGS

“BUCKLE UP!”

Buckle your seat-belts and get ready for the biblical “ride of your life”! Today we begin to explore together the epistle to the Romans, one of the greatest books of the Bible.

Consider this magnificent epistle, which has been called “the most profound and comprehensive book in the Bible” (Michael Middendorf). Romans is listed first among the New Testament epistles, not simply because it is the longest (over 7,000 words!) but because it is widely regarded as the chief among them.

The influence of Romans can be read in the lives shaped by its powerful good news. Saint Augustine’s conversion to Christianity began with his reading of Romans 13:13–14. Martin Luther called Romans a “brilliant light” and “the soul’s daily bread” which “can never be read too often or studied too much” (*Preface to Romans*). This letter was the source for Luther’s re-discovery of the Gospel which powered the Reformation. It has, accordingly, always had a strong connection with and influence upon the history of the Lutheran Church.

Not just Lutherans, of course! This book played a key role, for example, in John Wesley’s “warming.” In the year 1738, Wesley attended a Moravian meeting at Aldersgate Chapel in London. On hearing someone reading Luther’s Preface to Romans, he said, “I felt my heart strangely warmed... I did trust Christ, in Christ alone for salvation.” So was kindled the fire that led to the establishment of the Methodist movement.

Early in the twentieth century, a pastor in Switzerland named Karl Barth explored this letter as he searched for something to preach to his congregation. What he found in Romans did more than provide sermon texts. It shaped him in a way that led to Barth becoming a prophetic spokesman for the Confessing Church in Germany in its opposition to Adolf Hitler.

THE FIVE “W’S”

Before plunging in to the body of the letter, let’s address some basic questions. Theologians call these “isagogics.” The rest of us call them “the five W’s.” Who wrote it and to whom? Where was it written? When was it written? Why did the author write? What is the heart of its message?

WHO wrote it? As with most letters in that day, the writer signs his name, not at the end, but at the beginning. “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1). Most of us know this man and the dramatic story of his transformation. He went from proud Pharisee Saul, the sworn enemy of Jesus Christ, to Paul, a man who here describes himself as a “servant” of Christ Jesus, arguably the greatest missionary for Jesus and the Gospel who ever lived. No voice from the early church was ever raised against his authorship. Even now, few dispute it.

Strangely, we ought to acknowledge something many will find surprising: Paul did not actually write this letter! The person who did says so in 16:22: “I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.” Tertius, it turns out, was Paul’s “secretary” or scribe, who wrote while Paul dictated. A scribe with the skill of writing neatly and compactly could conserve space on the (expensive) scroll. It may also be that Paul’s physical condition (his “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Cor. 12:7 – an eye problem?) made writing difficult and necessitated a helper.

To WHOM was it written? “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (1:7). Most scholars believe the congregation at Rome

was predominantly Gentile. Jews, however, likely constituted a substantial minority. Paul’s mention of Abraham as “our forefather according to the flesh” (4:1) implies that there were Jews among his readers. More telling is that Paul devotes significant space to the ultimate fate of the Jews (Chapters 9–11) and to issues that arose between Gentiles and Jews (Chapters 14–15).

WHERE was Paul when he wrote Romans? He was most likely at Corinth on his third mission journey. He indicates that his work is almost finished and that “Macedonia and Achaia” have already made their contributions to the offering he was gathering for the relief of the church in Jerusalem (15:25–28). A strong piece of evidence for Corinth is the mention of Phoebe (16:1), a deaconess at Cenchræe, Corinth’s eastern port, who may have been the bearer of this letter to Rome. Two other names, Erastus and Gaius (16:23), probably have Corinthian connections. Erastus was a prominent citizen whose name is mentioned in a Latin inscription found in 1929 in Corinth. Gaius is likely the same man listed in 1 Cor. 1:14 as one of those few Paul baptized at Corinth.

The WHERE information probably also answers the WHEN question. Paul’s third mission journey, which concluded with his bringing of that offering to Jerusalem, is traditionally dated AD 53–57, more than twenty years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This letter would be from the latter years of that journey, as Paul finalized his work.

The most difficult of the “five W’s” is the why question. WHY did Paul undertake the writing of this massive and highly systematic epistle?

We are quite certain that Paul had not yet visited Rome. He says as much in 1:10–13 and adds that he has “been prevented” from coming but is “eager” to meet them and preach to them. At the very least, then, this epistle would serve as an introduction to his hoped-for personal ministry there. Since they have not met him in person, this letter serves to establish

his credibility, explain his teaching for them, and seek their approval. Further, he is not hesitant to reveal to them his plan to make a further journey to Spain. The wording in 15:24 (“to be helped on my journey there”) implies his request for their financial support in that endeavor. Nothing shy about Paul!

Some commentators assert that there is another reason for this letter. They say that Paul is responding to information he has received about the church in Rome, in particular, that he knows there is some friction between the Jewish and Gentile believers. He is making an appeal to them to welcome one another and avoid quarrels (14:1) and to live in harmony (15:5–7). Thus, he “pastors” them even before he meets them.

There remains one last, obvious “W” – WHAT is the shape and content of this letter? Many writers have taken a stab at drawing up an outline for this immensely rich and systematic epistle. Let’s take a look at one such outline provided by the Concordia Self-Study Bible, a book available and in use in many Lutheran churches. The outline focuses on a key word in Romans, the word “righteousness.” An abbreviated outline is as follows (CSSB p. 1716):

- I Introduction (1:1–15)
- II Theme: Righteousness from God (1:16–17)
- III The Unrighteousness of All Mankind (1:18–3:20)
- IV Righteousness Imputed – Justification (3:21–5:21)
- V Righteousness Imparted – Sanctification (6:1–8:39)
- VI Righteousness Vindicated: the Problem of the Rejection of Israel (Chapters 9–11)
- VII Righteousness Practiced (12:1–15:13)
- VIII Conclusion (15:14–33)
- IX Commendation and Greetings (Chapter 16)

While there is no single, authoritative outline, having

a look at this one or some other can begin to alert the student to things that other students have noticed as they made their journey through Romans earlier. It’s like talking to someone who has lived or traveled where you are about to vacation. They have ideas on what to look for, and you may find their observations a help as you undertake the same adventure.

SOME EXPLANATIONS AND A CHALLENGE

An adventure this certainly will be! Not merely mind-filling, we hope, but life-changing and faith-deepening as well. The investment of your best effort will yield dividends during this study and in the years thereafter.

Unless otherwise specified, the text for our study together will be the ESV. Personal application questions will propel you into the text of Romans and other scriptural citations as you prepare for the coming lesson. They will also challenge you to think about your faith and life as you meet the world week by week. There will normally be a dozen or more questions for each lesson. That will provide plenty to think about.

Speaking of challenges, here’s one from Dr. Martin Luther himself. Read the following quote, and ponder what Luther urges:

This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as bread for the soul. (LW 35:365)

Luther is thinking large, urging us to know the ENTIRE epistle, “word for word, by heart”! Most of us would dismiss this out of hand as a Mt. Everest-sized task. Instead of tackling that enormous mountain, how about a foothill or two? Want to take on a chapter? Or at least a few verses? To that end, I will place before you a single verse from each chapter that would be a place to start. Sure, it’s optional. But it could prove to be a personal treasure for you or someone you love. You’re never too old to do this. I’m convinced you’ll find a blessing in it!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 1:1-17

Lord God, who caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our instruction, grant us grace to read and understand it that we experience Your saving power and find our joy in it! In Jesus' name. Amen.

For Review:

1. What are two new things you have already learned about the epistle to the Romans?

Romans 1:1-7

2. Paul's first word of self-description is "servant" (the Greek word *doulos* literally means "slave"). What might be a reason Paul chooses to use that word first?

-
3. Three times in these verses, Paul uses the word "called." The last two uses apply to the readers (verses 6-7). To what are they (and we) "called"?

-
4. A striking phrase in 1:5 is "the obedience of faith." How does Paul mean obedience and faith to be related? On which word do you personally place more emphasis?

-
5. What is meant by "saints" (verse 7)? Who are they? Even some of us who have long been Christians are not accustomed to calling ourselves "saints." What, if anything, makes you hesitant to use that word about yourself?

Romans 1:8-15

6. How many times does Paul use first-person pronouns ("I" and "my" and "mine") in this section? _____

How many times does he use second-person plural pronouns ("You" and "your")? _____

What's the reason for that? _____

-
7. List some lessons a pastor could learn from these verses about the conduct of his ministry.

-
8. Which of the verses in this section implies that the readers are primarily Gentiles?

-
9. Paul says he hopes for a "harvest." The Greek word literally means "fruit." What do you think he means?
-

Romans 1:16-17

10. Paul uses the word “gospel” in verse 16. He has already used it in verses 1 and 15. In 25 words or fewer, write what the word “Gospel” means to you.

11. He says that the Gospel “is the power of God.” What other sources of power is the church today tempted to substitute for the Gospel?

12. When I think of being “saved,” I think chiefly in terms of being saved from:

- a) A guilty conscience
- b) The dangers of a hostile world
- c) The fear of death
- d) The wrath of God
- e) Or?

13. Paul says that salvation comes “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Why this order?

14. How would you define “righteousness”? (Check its usage in Jer. 23:6; Matt. 6:1; Rom. 4:3; 2 Cor. 5:21)

15. Paul loves to cite the Old Testament for his readers. What Scripture is he citing in verse 17? Read the verse in its original context there.

16. What will you take away from this lesson?

Finally, a suggested verse for memorizing, if you accept the challenge:

Romans 1:16a *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...*



ROMANS

ROMANS 1:1-17

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP – ROMANS 1:8–15	7
THE DYNAMITE – ROMANS 1:16–17	8
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*“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for
it is the power of God...”*

ROMANS 1:16



A DYNAMITE INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTRODUCTIONS

Life is a series of introductions. New parents get the thrill of introducing their baby to the whole world of sights, sounds, and experiences. A teacher introduces herself to a room of wide-eyed children on the first day of school. A young man introduces his nervous fiancée to his parents. Advertisers introduce new automobiles and electronic gadgets to a waiting public. A pastor introduces himself to the congregation he is about to serve.

That last scenario is actually what today’s study is all about. “Pastor” Paul is introducing himself and his message to a congregation he hopes to meet in person soon. The epistle to the Romans is one mighty, meaty letter of introduction. As we’ll soon see, it’s a “dynamite” introduction! His letter to them is still reverberating with the explosive power of that dynamite in hearts and minds almost 2,000 years later. That letter is still introducing people to the wondrous Gospel of Jesus Christ.

PAUL INTRODUCES HIMSELF

ROMANS 1:1-7

First, Paul introduces himself. Stop to consider how you’d introduce yourself to a prospective employer or a first date. Would you be bold? Careful? Transparent? What words would you choose to lay out who you are and what you’re all about?



Now look at the words Paul chose. The first is “servant.” In Greek, it’s even more striking. The word is *doulos*, which can also mean “slave.” Rome, in Paul’s day, had a population approaching one million people. Demographers estimate that 30% of those were slaves. It is almost certain that a significant number of the people in the congregation at Rome were slaves. They would understand that Paul was saying he no longer belonged to himself. Paul, as “slave,” was totally given over to the service of his new master Jesus.

There may be another reason for this term. William Barclay points out that in the Old Testament, “slave” (or “servant”) is a regular word to describe God’s appointed leaders and spokesmen. Moses (Joshua 1:2) and Joshua (Joshua 24:29) were both servants of God. The prophets were designated as God’s servants (see Amos 3:7 and Jer. 7:25). Paul sees himself as part of that company of “servants” who speak on God’s behalf.

A second term Paul employed is the word “called.” Three times in seven verses he uses it, first about his own call to be an “apostle” (v. 1), then twice about his readers. We understand Paul’s “calling” in the same way we say pastors receive a “call” to a particular congregation. We who are laypeople do not so frequently use it of ourselves, but we should! The Holy Spirit has “called me by the gospel” (*Small Catechism*). The Greek word for “church” (*ekklesia*) literally means “the called-out.” We are called out of one thing, “darkness,” and into another, “light” (1 Peter 2:9).

What are the Roman readers called into? Sainthood! Here, in verse 7, Paul tells his readers that they are called to be “saints,” a word that some of us are hesitant to embrace. We may have in our heads the sort of definition provided by a confirmation student: “a saint is a really good dead person.” Dead? Certainly not in 1 Timothy 5:10, where the saints need to have their feet washed! Here in Romans and elsewhere, the word “saints” could

also be translated “holy ones.” That holiness, Paul will make clear later, is not an accomplishment of religious super-heroes, but the gift Jesus came to impart (Eph. 5:25–26) — the washing of a whole life and not just the feet.

Paul expresses his goal for his readers another way, saying he wants to “bring about the obedience of faith” (v. 5). Which of these two words would YOU stress? Our tendency as Lutherans is to focus on faith and place it prior to obedience, separating words that are really two sides of the same coin. The result is that we neglect the “obeying” that is there when faith is there (as light and heat are there when the sun shines). Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained it thus: “Only the obedient believe, and only the believing obey” (*The Cost of Discipleship*). Luther somewhere remarked, “We are not saved by faith and works, but by a faith that works.” Paul calls it “the obedience of faith.”

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP

ROMANS 1:8–15

Having introduced himself, Paul boldly lays out his mission goals and goes immediately to work toward them. He knows he won’t accomplish anything without establishing a friendly relationship with the congregation. The relational bridge he builds to them is paved with personal pronouns. Though he has not yet met them, he employs 16 first person singular pronouns (“I,” “my,” “mine”) and 12 second person plural pronouns (“you” and “your”). All of them are Paul’s way of saying, “let’s have a relationship.”

For his part, Paul is already in relationship with them. Already that relationship is valued. Accordingly, he does here what he does in every letter, except Galatians. He launches into a thanksgiving which is both intensely personal and transparently emotional. “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you” (v. 8). Already they are in his prayers (v. 10). Already Paul is emotionally invested. “I long to see you” (v. 11).

This section is a model for pastors in the conduct of their ministry. What congregation wouldn't love to welcome a pastor who displayed such a thankful spirit? What congregation wouldn't be encouraged by a pastor who lifted them in prayer, even before he met them? In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer reminds pastors that they are never to be the congregation's "accusers" but always "intercessors." What congregation wouldn't be motivated to do its part by a pastor who was humble enough to acknowledge that ministry is a two-way street: "that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (v. 12)? Paul ends the section sounding like a man fresh out of seminary, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you" (v. 15). If I were a member of that congregation, I'd be thinking he couldn't get here soon enough!

Paul's personal interest in them is no act. He already knows a good deal about them, likely from friends like Aquila and Priscilla who had lived in Rome for a time. Paul knew they were a largely Gentile congregation. In verse 13, he says he wants to reap his harvest "among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles." He knows that some are not Gentiles and not everything is rosy. There is pointed discussion in Chapters 14–15 of conflicts over foods and holy days that likely grew out of the differences between Jewish and Gentile believers, an issue seemingly everywhere in the infant church.

He already has thought about and strategized his mission. The basic shape of it will be to reap some "harvest" (literally "fruit") among them. In the Bible, the mission task of the church is often framed in agricultural terms. Jesus speaks of a plentiful "harvest" in need of workers (Matt. 9:37). There is a harvest of new believers Paul surely hopes to reap. He may be using the word "fruit" also in its customary sense of the "good works" (Matt. 7:16). Those good works would necessarily include a more harmonious

relationship within the congregation itself as it seeks to resolve the aforementioned differences.

THE DYNAMITE

ROMANS 1:16-17

Paul has introduced himself and begun to establish a relationship with them. Now comes the "dynamite" introduction of the message he wants to preach. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God..." (v. 16). "Power" translates the Greek word *dynamis*, from which we get that explosive word "dynamite." It is a word the church desperately needs to hear in a time when churches are grabbing at whatever tools or approaches will empower a renewal in their life and mission. People ponder, "What can we use?" Traditional liturgy or contemporary music or maybe a blend of the two? A pastor conversant with church growth strategies? Lay leaders attending workshops on leadership, or reading just the right books on reaching Generation X or Millennials?

"Whoa!" Paul seems to say to them and us. It is not the eloquence of the preacher that does it. It's the dynamite message of the Savior! It is not the proper use of church growth principles that changes lives. It's the dynamite proclamation of His forgiving love. It's not the rhythms of the praise team, the soaring architecture, or the fine-tuned piety of the congregation. It's the Gospel!

Paul is, as they say, packing some serious heat with this Gospel he brings. This is already the fourth time he uses the word in this opening chapter. In verse 1, it was the "gospel of God." In verse 9, it is "the gospel of his Son." In verse 15, it is simply "the gospel." Now he begins to unpack it for them.

We already know that Gospel means "Good News." Most of us have memorized John 3:16 as the one-verse summary of that news. Here in verse 17, Paul explains it with a meaning-full

word. In the Gospel, he says, “the righteousness of God is revealed.” The heart of the word “righteous” is the smaller word “right.” Being put into a right relationship with God is what his Gospel message is about. The root meaning might well be rendered “just,” a term from the courtroom where justice is done. The verbal form of “righteousness” is the word “justify.” A righteous person is one who has been justified.

In his early years in the Roman Catholic Church, Luther was taught that justification was a cleansing process by which God gradually made people more righteous (not unlike the washing of a very dirty shirt). By the time of their death, most people were still not fully purged of sin’s stains, a fact that necessitated a “purgatory” where the completion of that cleansing made them fit for heaven. But here in Romans, Luther discovered that the verb “justify” denoted a declarative act rather than a process. Not over long years, but all in a moment, God’s declaration “not guilty!” makes sinners righteous, puts them back into a right relationship with Him.

That declaration of God, and not a string of human accomplishments, is what makes the difference. That verdict is not to be achieved, but rather received! That brings us to the crucial role of faith. Four times in these two verses, Paul uses the word “believes” or “faith.” That faith is not itself a work at all, but the trusting reception of God’s amnesty declaration. Faith relinquishes all reward on the basis of one’s work, as if salvation were a wage, in order to grasp the verdict of righteousness God supplies.

Paul says this salvation is given “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” This combination recurs in 2:9, 10; 3:9; 10:12 and elsewhere as “Jew and Gentile.” By mentioning them together, he reminds readers that there is one God over all people, regardless of race. But in saying “Jew first,” he points out the role God gave His chosen

people to be the vehicle for blessing the rest of the world. “Salvation,” Jesus Himself said, “is from the Jews” (John 4:22). The Savior who rescues all comes from Jewish fathers according to the flesh. Paul’s own mission strategy was to go first to the synagogues in the towns he visited. But there would be no difference in the way Jews and Greeks finally received that salvation.

All of that brings us at last to the theme of the entire letter of Romans: “the righteous shall live by faith.” It is the first of more than fifty quotations from the Old Testament Paul will use in Romans. Such quotes, in addition to their specific application, are Paul’s way of saying, “I’m not making any of this up! It has been there all along. It is God’s idea.” This first citation is of Habakkuk 2:4. The promise “shall live,” echoes how Jesus describes His mission in John 10:10: “I came that they may have life.” The quote from Habakkuk is deceptively complex. The verse’s original meaning could properly be rendered “the just shall live by his faithfulness.” Not simply the faith of the just person is in view, but also the faithfulness of God! What distinguishes the righteous from the wicked, according to Habakkuk, is that the righteous cling to the faithfulness of God in fearful times.

Paul will spend the rest of this great letter detailing the relationship of such words — righteousness, faith, and life. One professor told this writer, “the first part of Romans expands upon ‘he who through faith is righteous,’ and the second part expands on ‘shall live.’”

Is your mind spinning? Be patient. Settle in for the long haul and let Paul do his careful work of spading the soil and planting the seed. Gardens don’t grow overnight. Neither does our understanding of the richly-nuanced message in Romans. There’s much more to come. The adventure is only just begun.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 1:18-32

Father, as I open this great letter once more, help me read with a receptive mind and heart. Hold up the mirror and show me the truth about this hurting world...and about me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

For Review:

1. What key words did Paul use to introduce himself in Chapter 1?

2. What words did he use to unpack the message he hoped to bring?

3. Review your memory verse from Chapter 1. The “challenge” will continue in Chapter 2.

Romans 1:18-20

4. This section details God’s wrath. How does pop culture picture the “wrath of God” showing up in the world?

5. People like to say they don’t need church; they can worship God “in nature.” What CAN we learn about God from nature?

What CAN’T be learned about God from nature?

Romans 1:21-32

6. This is Paul’s chronicle of the fall into sin (Genesis 3) and its impact. “Claiming to be wise” (v. 22) describes whom?

7. What is the great sin mentioned repeatedly in the Old Testament? (Isaiah 44:9-20, for example, is an extended, impassioned diatribe against it.) _____

8. List several stories in the Old Testament that make reference to some of the images Paul has described. (Places to start include Ex. 32:1-4 and Dan. 3:1-7)

9. Paul had some direct experience of this. Look up Acts 14:8-13. What “idolatry” was attempted there?

10. Idolatry has not disappeared in the 21st century. What “idols” do people today worship?

What are you personally tempted to make into an idol?

11. Any religion is better than no religion. True or False? Why do you think people say this?

12. One word Paul uses for what happened in the fall is “exchanged.” What is exchanged for what in:

Verse 23 _____ for _____

Verse 25 _____ for _____

Verse 26 _____ for _____

13. What verb describes God’s response in verses 24–28? How many times is it used, and in which verses?

14. Some argue that the word “exchanged” applies only to consciously chosen homosexual acts, not to one’s innate orientation. How do you react?

15. Make a list of the words that Paul uses to describe what “life without God” is like, starting in verse 29. How many words or phrases are included?

16. What is God’s verdict on “those who practice such things” (v. 32)? _____

17. They “not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (v. 32). Give an example of how you see this happening today.

18. How did you feel as you read this section of Romans 1?

Were you thinking primarily about others or about yourself?



ROMANS

ROMANS 1:18–32

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Brace yourself! God is about to show you such a movie — a “sinnerama” of the carnage of sin and the wrath of God that follows.

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SINNERAMA!

Fifty years ago, state troopers used to visit high school driver's education classes. They showed grisly movies of highway carnage, hoping that the graphic images would provide sobering motivation for the students to drive with care. Brace yourself! God is about to show you such a movie — a “sinnerama” of the carnage of sin and the wrath of God that follows.

THE WRATH REVEALED AGAINST “WISE FOOLS”

ROMANS 1:18–22

Paul has just announced that the righteous will live by faith. Now he abruptly turns to explain why the unrighteous will die. It's a necessary backdrop to make clear the “why” behind the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The very righteousness of God which brings a believer from death to life must first pronounce a judgment of wrath on those who rebel and choose to live without Him. How does God's wrath unfold in this “sinnerama”?

Without mentioning Adam and Eve or the Garden of Eden, Paul manages to take us to the scene of the deadly crash known as “the fall into sin.” Roll that film! Where are we? It must be Eden, for we hear voices “claiming to be wise” (v. 22). We are listening to the serpent who pretended to dispense wise advice about God's true intentions. We can also hear the voice of our mother Eve, who saw that “the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6) and so felt the allure of the forbidden fruit.



Three times, as a response to humans' foolish exchange of good for bad, God "gave them up." He let them go. Confirmed their choice. Abandoned them to the consequences of their folly.



But the journey that started in supposed wisdom soon ended in foolishness and death. In the beginning, our first parents knew God and even entertained Him as He walked in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). The serpent's advice, however, seemed reasonable to Eve, and the fruit looked good. Like a giddy teen texting while driving, she plucked it and took a bite, unaware that she'd crossed the center line toward a frightful collision. She gave some to Adam. God's express command was disobeyed. Their reasoning proved worthless (v. 21). The truth they had known in their sweet communion with God was suppressed, denied, forgotten.

Should they have known better? Indeed so! People still say they DO know better. Many claim not to need church or the Bible; they can worship God "in nature." To a point, Paul himself would agree. There is much to be learned about God from the natural world. God's "eternal power (*dynamis* again, this time His creative energy) and divine nature" are on display in an unmistakable way (v. 20). We can read it clearly in the grandeur of Mt. Rainier, the Grand Canyon, and Niagara Falls. "For what can be known about God is plain to them" (v. 19). What cannot be learned by attentive observation of the natural world (1 Cor. 2:9) is how God finally chooses to show mercy to those who fail and fall, as Adam and Eve were about to do. Nature has much to say, but it will not speak the Gospel in our ears.

They should have known better, but they did not. There came the fall, the disobedience, the quietly chosen rebellion there in Eden. They "did not glorify" Him. Instead, what happens in the next section is a trio of fateful "exchanges," each of which exacts a wrathful response from God.

THREE-FOLD REBELLION AND GOD'S THREE-FOLD RESPONSE

ROMANS 1:22-28

Automobile crashes are normally caused by foolish or careless decisions by a driver. This section details the fateful decisions that ushered death into the world. This section portrays a dramatic back-and-forth between the rebellious human race and our righteous God. Three times the human rebellion takes the form of an "exchange" of good for bad. Three times God responds with... well, how DOES He respond? Watch the movie.

Our "sinnerama" camera keeps rolling as the story of God's wrath unfolds. What does that wrath look like? Pop culture imagines that it's a deadly plague, a massive earthquake, or a bolt of lightning. Golfer Lee Trevino was on the links one day when lightning flashed and thunder boomed nearby. "If God wants to play through," said Trevino, "let Him play through!" But the wrath of God as recorded by Paul is nothing like that. It is more dreadful and far more lasting. Three times, as a response to humans' foolish exchange of good for bad, God "gave them up." He let them go. Confirmed their choice. Abandoned them to the consequences of their folly. Here's the frame-by-frame depiction of that three-fold sequence of human rebellion (HR) and divine response (DR) played out on the big screen:

HR #1 (v. 23) – People "exchanged" the glory of God for images.

DR #1 (v. 24) – God "gave them up" to impurity.

HR #2 (v. 25) – People "exchanged" God's truth for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

DR #2 (v. 26) – God “gave them up” to dishonorable passions.

HR #3 (vv. 26b-27) – People “exchanged” natural sexual relations for those contrary to nature.

DR #3 (v. 28) – God “gave them up” to a debased mind.

IDOLATRY IN FOCUS

Paul may have begun this section with Eden’s disobedience in mind, but this “sinnerama” provides a wide-angle look at the human condition worldwide. Adam and Eve certainly “exchanged the truth of God” for the serpent’s lie (v. 25), but there is not yet mention in their story of the making of images. Full-blown idolatry comes into focus as time goes on. Aaron fashions a golden calf for the rebellious Israelites at Sinai (Ex. 32:4). Upon entering Canaan, the Israelites take up the regular worship of “the Baals and the Asheroth” (Judges 3:7). The prophet Isaiah goes on an extensive rant describing the process of making an idol and mocking its folly (Is. 44:9–20).

Idolatry earns top billing in the Old Testament as the “great sin.” Paul underlines that evaluation as he recounts the “exchanges” by which humans continually give away the priceless glory and truth of God and get nothing but what is impure and dishonorable in return. He may have been recalling his own experience in Lystra (Acts 14:8–13) where a crowd came close to “idolizing” him and Barnabas rather than worshipping the Creator.

We may mistakenly suppose that idolatry has disappeared in the 21st century. If you think so, consider that we are surrounded by more “images” than those old Israelites ever dreamed possible. Plastic cards with Visa, MasterCard and American Express logos. Billboard images of Bud Light and the latest lottery totals. TV screens with shiny cars, scantily-clad women, and “American Idol” contestants. Computer monitors with images that

lure millions into pornography addiction. The world is still an idol-making assembly line. The “exchanges” are still busily being made.

Even the sacred precincts of our churches are not safe havens. Lay people often “idolize” their pastors and their programs and pastors idolize their statistics and their reputations. We are not safe just because we have “religion.” Much religion, in the Old Testament times and still today, is just carefully crafted idolatry. “Any religion is better than no religion” is a piece of the devil’s crafty propaganda. If it gives people a false sense of security, and if it erects a wall against hearing the truth God intends, “any religion” may be worse than having “no religion”!

HOMOSEXUALITY IN FOCUS

Something noteworthy we observe here is that Paul specifically mentions homosexuality as an example of the fallen condition of humanity. This section of Romans 1 contains one of the clearest condemnations of homosexual behavior in the Bible (see also Lev. 18:22 and 1 Cor. 6:9), and in these times of changing societal mores, verses 24–27 have attracted an enormous amount of attention. Many of those who respond seek to soften or even abrogate Paul’s censure altogether. To condemn homosexual behavior is not a license to hate or an excuse to bash anyone. That should be clear. But what are we to make of his words?

Those who advocate the acceptance of “faithful” and “monogamous” homosexual relations or promote same-sex marriage seek to supply alternative interpretations. In his fine commentary on Romans, Dr. Michael Middendorf lists several, including these:

Paul is condemning only heterosexuals who behave as homosexuals.

Paul is condemning only abusive forms of such behavior (such as an older man abusing a young boy).

Paul is denouncing promiscuous behavior in the

same way he would denounce such abuses of heterosexual behavior.

Paul is limiting his condemnation to homosexual behavior overtly connected to idolatry.

None of these narrower interpretations can be sustained on the basis of the text. Paul chiefly argues from design. He uses the word “nature” to say that heterosexual behavior accords with God’s original design for humanity. Even those who act “naturally” out of a same-sex orientation, he says, act against the design. In a similar way, kleptomaniacs and alcoholics are not free to steal or drink to excess because they are “oriented” that way. What’s more, there are no limiting circumstances mentioned in the condemnation, whether the age of the participants, the confining of it to a single partner, or the presence of idolatry.

The church is not here called to condemn those who have a same-sex attraction. Instead, it calls them to live chastely. It is not the orientation but the behavior that is the point. When Paul uses the word “exchanged,” he is not describing someone’s individual life decision but is characterizing the fallen condition of our world, a change that transpired in history. The Creator’s will has been “exchanged” for our sinful human will. In his book *Things That Count*, ethicist Gilbert Meilaender writes: “By turning against the created meaning of our humanity as male and female, homosexual behavior claims the freedom to give our own meaning to life and thereby symbolically enacts a rejection of God’s will for the creation” (page 69). Paul uses this sin as one example, but he has many others in view, as the next section makes clear.

THE MOVIE’S MESSAGE — GOD’S VERDICT

ROMANS 1:29–32

Some movies depict the world following a nuclear holocaust. There are shattered cities in a desolate landscape. Survivors wander aimlessly or resort to violence to survive. That’s the feeling in verses 29–31, where Paul’s “sinnerama” takes us on a ride

through the world after the devastation of the fall. In three verses we read no less than twenty-one terms that portray how things are because of the dreadful “exchange.” People are “filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice...full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

It’s a breath-taking cast of characters! As if these unrighteous actors weren’t bad enough in themselves, he says, “they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (v. 32). People have always sinned. But our era has brought an appalling rewrite of values. For many, morality is determined by poll numbers! Our society increasingly mocks traditional virtue while it holds up wrongdoers as celebrities and bold pioneers. And that cultural approval or disapproval, observes Michael Middendorf, “impacts the practice of, or abstention from, numerous activities (e.g., greed, abortion, sexual immorality, premarital sex and cohabitation, homosexual conduct, pornography, swearing, divorce, family abandonment...).”

Most movies come to a moment when the “message” becomes clear to the viewers. A point is made. A verdict is rendered. Those high school students, after watching scenes of highway carnage, knew that the message was, “We need to drive carefully!”

The movie Paul shows us also has a message. We see God’s righteousness with stunning clarity, and the world’s unrighteousness in painful detail. We hear His verdict on “those who practice such things” (v. 32). They are without excuse (v. 20). They deserve to die!

“They”? This is no movie from which we can walk away. What appears to be about someone else is about to become painfully personal. “They” is about to become “you”! Chapter two will bring the message home in unmistakable terms.