

The Tragic Sense of Life

by Ray C. Stedman

The first sixteen verses of Paul's letter to the Romans are an introduction that concludes with a great statement by the apostle: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of God for salvation unto everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith," {cf, Rom 1:16-17}. By that tremendous declaration, Paul sets in focus for us the great theme of this letter: The power of God to heal the hurts of men and to give us liberty and freedom from the bondage of evil in our lives. With the power of the gospel comes the righteousness of God, the sense of worth to give significance and meaning to our lives. The power of God frees us from the control of sin; God frees us from the meaninglessness of despair and guilt. This power and righteousness is available to us, the apostle says, "by faith." That means the gospel can reach anyone, anywhere, at any time. Now that is the good news, that is the startling message that the church of Jesus Christ has for the world. There is nothing like it anywhere in the world, there is no rival to it. There is nothing that remotely approaches it in its possibilities in human affairs; therefore, we can say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Beginning with Verse 18 of Chapter 1, a more somber note is sounded. This section introduces the most extensive, careful, and logical analysis of the human dilemma that has ever been found. It extends from Chapter 1, Verse 18, through Chapter 3, Verse 20.

We will begin with Verses 18-20:

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. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. {Rom 1:18-20 NIV}

In the preceding verses, Paul has already spoken of the Son of God – the key and the heart of the gospel. He declared the power of God that is released among men by believing the gospel; he declared the righteousness of God which is granted to us as a gift which we cannot earn or ever deserve, but which is ours, nevertheless, by faith. But now Paul speaks of the wrath of God. This is the first negative note that has been sounded in this letter, yet it is a very necessary note because it introduces this passage that tells us why we need the gospel of God. We need it because men everywhere are suffering from the wrath of God.

What do you think of when you hear that phrase, "the wrath of God"?

- Most people think of the wrath of God as something that is yet to come, something that follows death – the judgment of God. It is true that hell and all that may follow are an expression of the wrath of God. But that is not what it means at this point.

- Most people think of the wrath of God as thunder and lightning and judgment, fire and brimstone and the sudden destruction and catastrophes that come upon obviously guilty sinners. And these are all manifestations of the wrath of God.
- But actually, the wrath of God is not something to come, it is present now. As the text says, it is “being revealed from heaven” – that is, it is going on right now.

When something is revealed from heaven, it doesn't pour down from the skies upon us. No, it is everywhere present because it is coming from invisible forces at work in our lives. Therefore, it is absolutely inescapable; everyone is confronted with, and suffers from, the wrath of God – without exception. His wrath is everywhere present, it is being manifested by the invisible resistance of God to the evil of men. And that is what is meant here by “the wrath of God.”

In 1962, I visited Mexico City with a group of businessmen from this area and we were invited to hold witnessing sessions in homes with some of the businessmen and wealthy leaders of Mexico. In order to properly orient us to the culture of Mexico, we had a session in a downtown hotel in Mexico City. Dr. Baenz-Camargo, a local Christian and a very wise university professor, instructed us in the uniqueness of Mexican culture. In a most beautiful and elegant way, he captured the heart of Mexican life and set it before us. He said there were five traits of Mexican society that he wanted us to understand. I won't dwell on these at any length, but for your interest, here they are:

1. He said that the first thing about Mexican people is that they have a sense of the dramatic, they love eloquence and oratory.
2. With that comes a love of beauty and pagentry.
3. Thirdly, and stemming from these first two characteristics, is a deeply embedded sense of inferiority – the Mexicans feel they are a small nation and an inferior people, desperately trying to catch up with the rest of the world.

4. That sense of inferiority, of course, produces the fourth mark of Mexican society, a resistance to authority. Rebelliousness and revolution are close to the surface in Mexico.
5. All of these traits find their ultimate expression in a kind of fatalism.

As Dr. Baenz-Camargo developed the first characteristic for us, this awareness of the dramatic in life, he used the phrase “the tragic sense of life.” Mexicans are aware of the tragic aspects of life.

I have not forgotten that because I find that it applies not only to Mexican people, but to people everywhere. We are continually confronted with this tragic sense of life. It is the wrath of God Paul is talking about.

Why is it that tragedy is so close to the surface? Even in the moments of joy and gladness, we experience it. We've all felt this bitter-sweet character of life, when, in the midst of all the warmth and joy of the home circle, there is an underlying sense of fear, of the probability of the whole thing suddenly being turned into tragedy and sorrow. Why is that? This is Christmas time, the season of the year when men are traditionally more glad and joyful, more mellow, perhaps, than at any other time of the year, and yet statisticians tell us that the suicide rate mounts alarmingly at Christmas time. Anyone who has experienced it knows that the loneliness which can be borne throughout the year can be deeply etched in bitter symbols upon our hearts during Christmas. That sorrow and grief seem to be more dark and gloomy and foreboding than at any other time. Now why is that? It is because of the wrath of God. God's resistance against human evil is creating this sense of tragedy and darkness that we live with. I think Moses, in the 90th Psalm, expresses this perfectly. He says:

**For all our days pass away under thy
wrath,
our years come to an end like a sigh.
The years of our life are threescore and ten,
or even by reason of strength four-score;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
{Psa 90:9-11 RSV}**

The shortness of life, the brevity of it, the sorrow of it, the tragedy of it – this is all part of what Paul captures here under this phrase “the wrath of

God ... being revealed from heaven.” No one escapes God’s wrath; it is revealed, and we have to face it.

The rest of Verse 18 reveals the cause of this wrath. The apostle explains that it is “the godlessness and the wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” that cause God’s wrath. The tragic aspect of life is caused by the attitudes men have and the subsequent actions that follow. Notice the order of this – godlessness and then wickedness. The order is never reversed. It is the godless attitude that produces the wicked actions, and that is why the wrath of God is being revealed constantly from heaven against man. What is godlessness? Godlessness isn’t necessarily atheism, the belief that God doesn’t exist. Godlessness is acting as though he doesn’t exist, disregarding God. That attitude is widespread in our society today; it is what we call the “secular” attitude. It doesn’t necessarily deny that there is a God, but it never takes any account of him; it doesn’t expect him to be active. That is the attitude of godlessness which the apostle speaks of here.

As a result of godlessness, there is unrighteousness or wickedness, selfish and hurtful acts of men toward one another. Why do we act selfishly? Why do we hurt each other? Because we disregard God. That is Paul’s analysis. By means of these hurtful and selfish acts, the truth is suppressed. Now that is the problem!

Here we are in a world in which truth from God is breaking out all around us, but we are busy covering it up, hiding it, suppressing it, keeping it from being prominent and dominant in our thinking. That’s the picture. Against that attitude of hiding truth, suppressing the truth, the wrath of God burns among the human family. The reason why life has turned tragic in so many cases is because the world is deprived of the truth that is necessary for life and liberty and freedom and godliness, and it is hidden by men and suppressed by them.

Verses 19-20 set before us the nature of the truth that is suppressed:

since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been

clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. {Rom 1:19-20 RSV}

The truth that men labor to suppress is the existence of a God of eternal power and majesty; they suppress the greatness of God. This is the very truth Job 9 so eloquently expounds, the truth the world hides. There is, as you know, an evident conspiracy not to mention God. Don’t talk about him; don’t act as though God has anything to do with our common affairs in life; admit that there is a God if you want to, but don’t expect him to interfere or to do anything with us. Don’t, above all else, mention his name.

Isn’t that strange? Somebody has put it this way in a little poem entitled, *The Humanist*:

He exists because he was created.
He’s here because he was placed here.
He’s well and comfortable because divine
power keeps him so.
He dines at God’s table.
He’s sheltered by the roof that God gave him.
He’s clothed by God’s bounty.
He lives by breathing God’s air which keeps
him strong and vocal to go about persuading
people that whether God is or not,
only man matters.

Man, in his puniness and weakness, struts about acting as though there were no God. That is the truth that men suppress. But there are times when men cannot evade the fact of God; and when those times come, when they just have to speak of God, people resort to euphemism. They don’t use the name of God, they call him something else. They may call him “nature.” “Nature” is responsible for the way we are. Well this, of course, is because nature is what we are; nature is the sum total of all the phenomena of the natural world. To say that the sum total of the phenomena of the natural world accomplishes what is the phenomena of the natural world is nonsense. Yet everywhere this is the way men talk. That is simply a way to avoid mentioning that God is at work in human affairs.

Sometimes men call it fate, or karma, or destiny.

And yet, I think it is one of the ironies of life that God, who sits above the heavens, often laughs at the foolishness of men. He has arranged it so that they can’t even rip off a round oath without

mentioning the name of God. You never hear people go about saying, "By nature I'm going to do this." You never hear them say, "Fate damn you!" But, in order to be emphatic, men must use the name of God. Though they will not use him in other ways, God sees to it that they recognize his presence when they swear. Isn't that strange? But that's what happens. The great God who made all things is ignored and treated with this conspiracy of silence, and yet we can't even swear without him.

How has God made truth plain? The Scripture says that God has revealed himself to man. Truth is not a vague, invisible, difficult thing to comprehend; it is clearly seen. God himself has insured that. How? The Scriptures say, "It is seen in that which is made," i.e., creation. From the creation of the world it is visible; i.e., it has been always and everywhere present. There is no one who is left out – all can read this revelation of God if they want to do so.

One night my daughter, Laurie, and I were walking at Forest Home in the mountains of Southern California. It was one of those beautiful nights when the stars were out in all their glory – we were above the smog – and we walked through the darkness and looked up into the skies and saw the stars and felt the sense of awe that comes upon the human spirit on occasions like that. I began to point out the Milky Way and explain to her that it was part of the galaxy that we belong to. I told her there were millions of galaxies like that whirling on in their determined courses in their appointed ways, never late, always on time, strange and almost unexplorable by man. I pointed out the Big Dipper, the North Star, Pleiades – and we talked about the universe. And then, in a joking way, I said to her, "But remember, dear, all this happened just by chance; all these things came together by chance." And she began to laugh! How ridiculous that in all this vast, impressive, imposing display of beauty and light and order anybody should ever say it all happened by chance! She sensed the nonsense of that claim. How can we say that only by intelligence and wisdom and skill can a watch be built, but hearts beat and babies grow and roses smell simply by chance. Isn't that ridiculous? You only have to put it that way to see how foolish, how absurd, a statement like that can be.

This argument from design and order has never been answered. Those who disregard God cannot explain it because truth about God is breaking out

everywhere around us. Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush aflame with God.
But only those who see take off their shoes;
the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

Thus, says the Scripture, men are without excuse. No one who really wants to find God need miss him. One of the great verses that confronts the problem of what happens to those who never hear the gospel is Hebrews 11:6. It says: "He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him." Just two things are necessary:

- First, he must believe that God is there. Everything in his life is telling him that. Everything about himself is yelling at him, shrieking at him, that God has planned all these things. The easiest thing in the universe to believe is that God is there. You must work hard at convincing yourself that he is not there, and only the very intelligent are able to do it. The rest of us, who simply see facts and believe them, will accept the fact that God is there. Those who never hear the gospel first must believe God is.
- Then, they must diligently seek him. If men don't find God, it is because they don't seek him. The Scriptures promise us that if we seek after him, he will give further light on himself, and that light will eventually lead, as other Scriptures tell us, to the knowledge of Jesus Christ; for without the Son, no man can come to the Father. There is no other "name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" {Acts 4:12b KJV}, but the name of Jesus.

It starts with where you are and the revelation that is in nature and in yourself about the majesty and the power and the greatness of God.

In Verses 21-23, the apostle tells us in detail how men suppress the truth about God:

For although they knew God they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Al-

though they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. {Rom 1:21-23 NIV}

Paul tells us in detail how men suppress the truth about God. There are three steps traced for us here and the effects they have upon the race:

1. First, they neither glorify God nor give thanks to him. In other words, they ignore him. There is this obvious conspiracy of silence. That is why we are not allowed to sing carols in our public schools at Christmas time; that is why there is great resistance against having the Bible read on almost any public occasion today. No one wants to admit that there is a God They do not glorify him as God, neither do they give him thanks.

Last year Senator Mark Hatfield led the Senate in passing a resolution calling this nation to a day of prayer and repentance, and many of us sought to fulfill this by having public meetings on that day. At Foothill College, a number of our young people tried to hold a public meeting for this purpose. Two of our young men went there dressed like the prophets of Israel in burlap sack cloth and with ashes on their foreheads. They held up a sign that said, "Repent and give thanks." They told me that people would pass by and glower at them, and two people came over and spit at them. One man even left his appointed path and came over and kicked them. That is testimony to this statement in Romans. Men resist acknowledging the presence of God.

The effects of this are immediate. Paul says two things are immediately created in society when this attitude prevails:

- First, the peoples' thinking becomes futile;
- Second, their hearts become darkened.

Futile thinking means that clever ideas and procedures and programs will fall apart and come to nothing. In my own lifetime I have lived through the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Society, Peace with Honor, and the Great Recovery. All of them have failed dismally! They all started with brilliant promises, glow-

ing words of hope and expectation; and every one of them came to the same dismal end.

When hearts are darkened, human needs which ought to evoke emotions of pity and response are passed by. People lose compassion and awareness of the struggles and needs of others. Some of us have been horrified at the accounts in the paper of people in desperate need, calling out for help, while people wait right by and ignore them because they don't want to get involved. That is the sign of a darkened heart, and it is the result of ignoring God. The first device men employ to suppress the truth is to ignore God.

2. The second device they use is to claim to be wise. In other words, they imitate God. They claim to know and be able to know everything and to run anything. The result of that is put in one brief, blunt, pungent word: They become fools!

Remember the old story of the sorcerer's apprentice who, picking up the magician's wand, loosens powers that he doesn't know how to handle? Finally he cowers in terror at the tremendous forces that he has unleashed. Just read the intellectual magazines of our day and see how clever the secular writers are. They are masters at taking some simple discovery and making it sound impressive and profound, as though it were on a parallel with the creation of the universe as recorded by Moses. They claim to be wise, but they become fools.

3. The third device men employ to suppress the truth is that they exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made like mortal man. They exchange the glory of the undying God for images made like dying men, and birds, and animals, and reptiles. Notice the descending order. When idolatry begins, it begins first with men making images of men. The world is filled with statues, most of them reflecting the images of the ancient Greek and Roman world. These, of course, are merely symbols of ideas that men worship, and we still have such images today. But these images invalidate God; they debase him by substituting something for God and making God seem to be less than what he is. That is what idolatry always does. It is a very destructive force in human affairs.

Idolatry begins first with men, then birds (which are at least heavenly), then animals, and finally it ends up with reptiles. Man is at one end and a snake at the other.

Do you think people don't worship images and bow down before idols now? What are movie stars and football heroes? They are dying men and women who are idolized and worshipped in our day. And I, personally, don't believe that it is any accident that we tend to name our cars after animals. We once named them after men: Lincoln, Ford, Chrysler and Dodge. But now we are naming them after animals: Impala, Cougar, Mustang, Pinto, Jaguar, Rabbit, Panther, and there's even a Greyhound bus! It is God's ironic way of forcing men to name what is going on inside. We already have a car called the Cobra. And perhaps we will soon be naming our cars for the python, vipers, and maybe, for the slower models, the crocodile.

These are our gods, aren't they? We worship rockets, planes, guns, bombs, tanks. We worship power, military power, or forces like sex, and money, ambition, and greed; or concepts like comfort, beauty, youth, adventure, life. We've exchanged the glory of the undying God in all his majesty and greatness for images. What are movies but images? What is television – images of mortal men, birds, animals, and reptiles.

The effect of idolatry upon a society is profound and terrible to contemplate, and that is what we are going to see next week. Paul is going to analyze our society for us as he analyzed the society of the 1st century, and we will find it is exactly the same. We are right where they were. We will see what happens in a society when men everywhere begin to worship men and women, birds and animals, reptiles, and the ideas that these represent.

The amazing thing to me is that this description of the wrath of God is wholly and fully met by the righteousness of God. God's righteousness wipes out his wrath.

Wouldn't you think, therefore, that men everywhere would be eager to discover this marvelous gift of the righteousness of God? That is what heals our hurts and corrects our errors and gives a sense of peace and joy and forgiveness to the heart. The wrath of God creates the hurts of life; all the pain and heartache and darkness, the death, the depression, the despair all come from the wrath of God. They are the products of ignoring God, trying to imitate God, and invalidating God in our lives.

Wouldn't you think that men everywhere would long to hear this good news? Yet the wonder of our times and the revelation of the twisted, demoralized, distorted world in which we live is that we cling to our hurts and refuse the healing of God.

Prayer:

Oh Mighty God, our Father, we are amazed as we think about what is happening in this world. In our own hearts we see it through these apostolic eyes and we know indeed that this is the truth. It is confirmed and supported by every fact we can observe in life around us and in our own affairs. Help us, therefore, Lord, to heed to the righteousness of God, the gift of God which is Jesus Christ, our Lord. May there not be one among us that does not open his or her heart to the healing thrust of the Son of righteousness who rises with healing in his wings that he might forgive and heal the hurts of humanity. We pray in his name, Amen.

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