

Embracing the Darkness

The Banquet Table of Consequences – Part IV

Romans 1:21-23

Review

The poetry of God is disregarded!

In the book of Proverbs, in chapter 9, verse 10, the Spirit inspired Solomon to include, in his wisdom sayings, the following phrase,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

The wise person is one who fears the Lord. The fool is one, then, who disregards the Lord.

Donald Grey Barnhouse illustrated what it means to fear the Lord. The following is the illustration that he used in his sermon manuscript.

Several years ago I married a young couple. They had met when they were in Jr. High school and had never looked at anyone else. After the wedding, they went away on their honeymoon and after a few weeks came home again. I saw them in church the next Sunday and greeted them with a little pleasantries. I asked the bride if she had burned the roast for their first dinner. They laughed and she said, "Oh, I was afraid that I was going to do that. I had read so much about brides not being able to cook that I decided that John was going to have the very best meal a bride could prepare for her husband. So I began about three o'clock; I got everything out and started to work. When I finally put things on to cook, I was afraid it wouldn't turn out right. Then, of course, John

had to be late getting home and then I was so afraid things would be spoiled."

I interrupted her and said, "You have said three times now that you were afraid. . . . did you think he was going to beat you?"

She said, "Of course not," and looked at him with all the love of her heart in her eyes.

"But," I persisted, "you said that you were afraid."

She broke in, "You know what I mean."

And of course I did. Her fear was not fright. Her fear was simply a great desire to please and serve the one to whom she had given herself entirely. In this case then, [to borrow from the words of Solomon] the fear of John was the beginning of good cooking. Perhaps this will enable you to understand how the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and understanding.ⁱ

It is true that when you desire to so live for, so serve, so love, and so please the Lord, then, upon that foundation, will true wisdom and understanding for living be built.

To ignore God, however, is the beginning of foolishness. Rather than becoming wise, the unbeliever loses the ability to act with discernment and sound judgment. They do not know right from wrong; they sin without any regard for consequences. And, they demand to be considered wise.

Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 1, verse 22,

Professing to be wise,

(that is, they grant each other degrees, they affirm each other's opinions as sophisticated, refined, and academic, they slap each other on the back and cheer one another on in their digression intellectually and morally),

they became fools

The word "fool" means "without insight". How did they get that way?

They saw the signs from God, but they refused the signs; they rebelled against the signs. As I have illustrated in a previous discussion, they are like the driver of a car on a winding mountain road who sees a sign that says, "Slow down, dangerous curve ahead". The driver has a choice to obey the sign and slow down, ignore the sign and maintain the same speed, or rebel against the sign, increase speed, and suffer the consequences.

I remember being in a van on the coast of France with my wife and some missionaries. We were going up a winding, one lane road that wove back and forth along a mountainside. The edge of the road was so close to a sheer drop that you could not even see the road. I was in the front passenger seat and I did not want to look out the window. There was nothing but a precipice outside my window. I found myself leaning toward the driver, as if I could somehow help the van keep from tipping over. I was like my wife, who presses her foot down on an imaginary brake pedal when I am driving. It is as if she is contributing to my driving. The carpet is worn at that spot on her side of the car.

Imagine a mountain road with a warning sign to slow down that you choose to rebel against. You increase your speed, as if to say, "I will show that sign a thing or two."

You would be a fool. And, that is exactly what Paul says humanity has become, when he says, "Professing [themselves] to be wise," in their rebellion, they increase their speed and, "they became fools".

Now, do you remember, from our previous discussion, the two signs from God that reveal the truth of Himself and His Law? They are:

- creation and
- conscience!

Notice a word, in verse 20b of Romans, chapter 1, that I have not yet stressed. It says,

... being understood through what has been made ...

The word "made" is the Greek word "poiema" (ποίημα), from which we get our transliterated word "poem".

Creation is the poetry of God. It is His artistic masterpiece and should bring all of humanity to want to find the Artist. Instead, the poetry of God is disregarded, while the masterpiece is attributed to chance and evolution.

The wrath of God is deserved!

In this review, secondly, not only is the poetry of God disregarded, but the wrath of God is deserved. Verse 20 ends with the unmistakably clear words,

... without excuse ...

Instead of seeing the divine Artist, mankind has sought to explain Him away. They have ignored his brush strokes, suppressed the truth of His masterful design, and silenced the voice He painted on our hearts that whispers moral truth and final accountability.

Charles Darwin once said that man is developed from an ovule which differs in no respect from the ovules of other animals. When Darwin said that, he knew nothing about genes; he knew nothing about chromosomes; he knew nothing about DNA and its millions of bits of information.

One author said, "Darwin's statement is as foolish as saying that the California redwood tree develops from a tiny seed that differs in no respect from the seed that produces the ragweed."

The truth is, the difference is staggering.ⁱⁱ

There is a chemist in our church, who teaches at a nearby university, which will remain nameless, other than to say that I hope their football team does better than their basketball team. She was telling me that the issue today, is not as much the origin of life. That is sort of passé, simply because of all of the discoveries related to DNA and the information embedded within living cells. Now, she said, the issue and question, within the scientific world, is the origin of the information that produces life.

Where did all of that information come from? John, chapter 1, verse 1, says, "In the beginning was the Word," or the "logos," the reason, the information – and the information came from God.

Sinful humanity, however, must find another source, another cause, another something, other than a personal, living, holy, righteous God. God exists, and everyone knows it, so they must deny it.

Missiologist Leith Samuel writes,

Many missionaries point out that the heathen know more than we think. They know that there is a God. There are no atheists among heathen tribesmen. There has never been discovered upon earth a tribe of people, however small or depraved, which has not believed in some kind of god or had some system of worship . . . they even know they have sinned. When a Christian comes to them and talks about sin, he often finds ready acknowledgment that this is true. They are already aware that they have done wrong things and that wrong things must be punished. They are already afraid of punishment, and afraid of death. They know that sin must be atoned for, and they seek ways of appeasing their deities or deity.ⁱⁱⁱ

David Livingston, the famous missionary to Africa, reported, nearly two hundred years ago, that he found primitive tribes, who were completely out of touch with each other, as well as with basic civilization, and who possessed no knowledge of Scripture or civilized morality, but yet, were still conscious of being sinners.^{iv}

After Charles Darwin took his famous trip in the *Beagle*, he returned to England saying that he had indeed found a tribe of savages, on the island of Tierra del Fuego, who had no religion whatsoever; no concept of morality or God. He used that tribe to prove his thesis that man is just another animal. But the believers in England immediately formed a mission society to go and reach that tribe on the island. They sent missionaries who, after learning the language and customs, discovered that the people had religious ideas, concepts, and practices that had somehow, all missed the eyes of Darwin.^v

Mankind is incurably religious. He will at least worship himself. However, he is also rebellious.

The Knowledge of the Reality of God

Now, in Romans, chapter 1, verse 21, Paul continues to prove the guilt of humanity and the coming fury and judgment of God, as he writes,

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks . . .

In other words, there is a universal knowledge of the reality of God.

Three kinds of “knowing”

You need to understand, however, that there are at least three levels of knowledge of God.

Actual awareness

1. The first level of knowledge of the reality of God is actual awareness.

This is true knowledge, but not extensive knowledge. It does not affect us or involve us personally. For example, you are aware that the earth is round instead of flat, but you really do not care. You are also aware that $E=mc^2$, but just knowing that fact does not really impact the way you live your life.

Detailed description

2. A second level of knowledge goes beyond vague awareness to detailed description.

This is the theologian who studies and knows a lot about God, a lot about church history, a lot about biblical languages, but is still on his way to an everlasting hell because it is nothing but mere facts to him, and not personal faith.

Personal possession

3. The third, and highest level of knowledge, is personal possession.

This is truth that is indeed truth. And, you believe and live by it.

The Emptiness of the Reasoning of Man

So, in verse 21, Paul is not saying that everyone has a personal knowledge of God, or even a detailed description of God. Instead, he is, in effect, saying, “even though they knew ‘about’ God,” that is, “even though they had a vague awareness of God’s existence, they did not honor Him.”

As I have said before, mankind will be judged, not by the light they were not given about God, but by the light they were given about God and refused to honor.

The response of man toward God

Paul says, in verse 21, “Even though they were aware of God, they refused to honor Him,” or literally, “they refused to glorify Him”.

Refusal to give God glory!

1. The first response of unregenerate man toward their Creator is a refusal to give God glory.

Glory, or honor, in this verse, is from the Greek root “doxa” (δοξα). It gives us our word “orthodox”. Originally, the verb meant, “to have an opinion”. So, orthodox meant simply, “a correct opinion or straight opinion”. A paradox was, “a contrary opinion”.

Who can give God glory? Only the person who has a right opinion of God! This is the one who knows Him properly and appreciates His attributes and character; the one who has the correct opinion that God is holy, just, righteous, gracious, and merciful; the one who praises God for who God is. This person is in the process of giving God “doxa,” honor or glory.

The Greek word “doxa” also gives us the word “doxology,” or “praise to God for who He is”. We have put that word to music, whereby we also praise God for who He is. We sing,

Praise God, from whom blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

The unbelieving man or woman refuses to give God glory for who He is; that is, the almighty, Creator, sustaining God. They refuse, as it were, to sing the doxology!

How to give glory to God

The question remains, however, “How do we give glory to God? Besides singing in church or in private, how do we worship God and ascribe to Him glory every single day?”

Let me give a number of ways:

- By acknowledging Christ as your Lord.
Philippians 2:11 – “and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”
- By admitting your sin.
Joshua 7:19-20 – “Then Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, I implore you, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me.’ So Achan answered Joshua and said, ‘Truly, I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and this is what I did’”

- By trusting Him with your life.
Romans 4:20-21 – Paul is speaking of Abraham’s trust in following the will of God for his life, when he writes, “. . . with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.”
- By praising Him with your voice.
Psalm 149:1, 5-6a – “Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise in the congregation of the godly ones. . . . Let the godly ones exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their mouth. . . .”
- By praying for His will to be done.
John 14:13 – “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”
- By serving the church family.
I Peter 4:10-11 – “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”
You might have thought that when you were parking cars, changing diapers, greeting visitors, setting up chairs, or directing children’s games that you were simply helping to fill a need. Instead, you were bringing honor and glory to God! You were expressing your right opinion of God’s worth! He is worth it to you!
- By preaching and teaching the Word of God.
II Thessalonians 3:1 – “Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you”
I think also, of the early church in Acts, chapter 2, which saw the rapid spread of the Word of God being preached and taught, so that the church was “praising God”.
- By living a morally pure life.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 – “Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

- By introducing unbelievers to Christ.

II Corinthians 4:15 – “For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.”

- By bearing spiritual fruit.

John 15:8 – “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”

Fruit is a reference to that which is godly attitudes and actions.^{vi}

- By thanking God for the ministry of other believers.

It is one thing to thank Him for what you do; it is another thing to get excited about what God is doing through someone else. When you do, you bring glory and honor to God.

II Corinthians 9:13 – “. . . [The saints] will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ . . .”

- By dying as a faithful disciple.

There are many people who want to die as a faithful disciple, but without having to live a faithful life; who want to die a godly death, but without having to live a godly life.

John 21:19 – Jesus was talking to Peter about the fact that he would die a martyr’s death. In the course of that conversation, however, Christ talks to all of us about the fact that even in our death, we can bring glory to God. It reads, “Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. . . .”

Peter’s faithful life would result in a God-glorifying death. Is it not incredible that even in the last breath you draw, you can bring glory to God?!

These are the things that an unbeliever cannot and will not do:

- acknowledge Christ as Lord,
- admit their sin,
- trust Christ with their lives,
- praise Him with their voice,
- pray for His will to be done,
- serve the church,
- respect the Word of God,
- live a morally pure life,
- introduce other unbelievers to Christ,
- bear spiritual fruit,
- thank God for the ministry of believers,
- die as a faithful disciple.

They will not give glory to God!

Refusal to give God gratitude!

2. Secondly, mankind refuses to give God, not only glory, but gratitude.

Paul writes, in verse 21 of Romans, chapter 1, *For even though they knew [about] God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks . . .*

Os Guinness, referring to this verse, wrote, “Rebellion against God does not begin with the clenched fist of atheism but with the self-satisfied heart of the one [who cannot say] ‘thank you’.”^{vii}

Has it ever occurred to you that one of the key characteristics that distinguishes a believer from a non-believer is the believer’s ability to say, “Thank you,” to God – and mean it!

So, just how distinctive is your life, Christian? Are you really that different than the world? Or do you register your complaints before God, like some ornery hotel patron who does not like the towels and does not like the food and does not like the mattress and does not like the service and demands to know, “Where’s the hotel manager?!”

That is the world’s attitude toward everything. It is only the believer who says to God, “Thank you, Lord!”

The Digression of Man from God’s Truth

Paul goes on to say, in the last part of Romans, chapter 1, verse 21, that because man will not give glory or gratitude to God, they spiral downward.

Worthless self-invention – emptiness!

1. First, they become involved in worthless self-inventions or empty speculations.

Paul writes, in verse 21b,

. . . but they became futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened.

Whether it is the burning of incense to departed loved ones, or the scented beads of wood that are passed through oriental fingers as they recite their prayers, or the Osiris myth from Egypt of the god of the underworld, mankind is incurably religious.

Mankind is also constantly speculating. Read a recent newspaper and learn of college students going, while on spring break, to a nearby Buddhist monastery and studying the wheel of life and death. Read about a major conference for Mormons in this county. Read of how to order a CD on Hinduism that is compiled by, among others, a Hindu priest who also happens to be a radiologist. And, read about the debate among Methodists over their new hymnal that includes hymns about God as divine Mother.

Those who refuse to glorify God, the Creator, and His Son, the Redeemer, are left alone to wander through the maze and to hope that they can find a way out.

Roy Laurin writes,

What man lost in fellowship with a personal God and what he has tried to retrieve by centuries of fetishism, idolatry and polytheism is found in fellowship with Jesus Christ. What was lost through disobedience to God's spoken Word is restored by obedience to God's written Word. What man has tried to regain by religious achievement is gained by faith alone for the just shall live by faith.^{viii}

Wayward self-deception – darkness!

2. Secondly, unbelieving mankind becomes trapped in the darkness of their self-deception.

In verse 22, Paul writes,

Professing to be wise, they became fools

Their digression continues as they, Paul writes in verse 23,

. . . exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

If you do not give glory to God, you end up giving a man or woman worship. Or, you digress to giving birds and then, cows and finally, worms and beetles glory. The unbeliever prefers to worship their self-made gods; they have chosen to embrace the darkness! And, they congratulate one another on their brilliance.

God, however, says something different about unbelievers than they say about each other. He says, as we have read in verse 22,

Professing to be wise, they became . . .

– the Greek word for “fools” means “morons”.

That is not exactly something to “write home about”.

When John the Baptist stepped out onto the darkened stage of world history, he introduced the Messiah, according to John, chapter 1, verse 9, by saying,

[He is] the true Light, which . . . enlightens every man.

In other words, God sent His Son to earth to turn on the light in a very dark world.

John, chapter 1, verse 4, says,

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.

Skip to verse 12.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God . . .

In other words, God gave those who received Him the right to leave the company of the damned and join the company of the redeemed. All others will one day face the fury of God. God will mete out holy justice to all who displaced Him with worms, beetles, incense, beads, the sun, the trees, birds, cows, fire, stars, demons, and man himself.

One day, the new creation will sing. As Revelation, chapter 5, verse 13, tells us,

. . . every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, [will be] saying, “To Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and power forever and ever.”

Dear Christian friend, your life on earth should be spent rehearsing for that day. That is the day when worshipping the Lamb will be done face to face; when we join together as one great choir and sing the doxology to the glory and honor of God!

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ⁱ Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans Vol. 1 (Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), p. 264.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 248.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Phillips, Exploring Romans (Moody Press, 1969), p. 24.

^{iv} Roy Laurin, Romans (Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 36.

^v Barnhouse, p. 247.

^{vi} John MacArthur Jr., The Wrath of God (Moody Press, 1986), p. 66.

^{vii} Quoted by James Montgomery Boice in Romans Vol. 1 (Baker Book House, 1991), p. 164.

^{viii} Roy Laurin, Romans; Where Life Begins (Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 44.