

The Rumbling of Vesuvius

The Perfect Judge Part III

Romans 2:5-8

Introduction

When the apostle Paul was being transported as a prisoner to Rome, his ship docked to the south of Rome near an Italian port city that would become a household name. The city lay in the shadow of a huge and rugged mountain – a volcano that had not erupted for over a thousand years. But some time, shortly after Paul’s death, that volcano, named Vesuvius, exploded like an atomic bomb. It erupted for more than forty hours, flooding the city with molten lava and burying the inhabitants before they could escape. They were actually killed by the poisonous gasses and the ash and then, preserved by the molten lava, which rolled over them and sealed them in a gigantic tomb of rock.

For hundreds of years, the city remained buried under twenty feet of hardened lava. Modern excavations, however, have given us a perfectly preserved Roman city, frozen in time. One author wrote, “caught in the act of being itself.”¹

That city was Pompeii. It is interesting to consider that Pompeii, along with other prominent cities in Rome, was the recipient of Paul’s letter to the Romans. It is a letter that declares the gospel and also warns of coming judgment. But, for the 20,000 people who lived in Pompeii, if they read the letter, it, evidently, made little difference.

The citizens of Pompeii worshipped two gods – Venus, the goddess of love, and Mercury, the god of commerce. To put it bluntly, they worshipped gods of money and sexual pleasure. The city was nearly entirely given over to immorality. The excavations have revealed that the city walls were filled with

advertisements from prostitutes. On the walls of brothels were testimonies of satisfied customers. So pornographic was this city that excavated statues and sculptures were hidden, for many years, in the back rooms of Italian museums because they were too obscene. Everywhere, throughout the city, were models and carvings of the male sexual organ, which was considered the symbol of success in Pompeii. It was carved on sidewalks and on the walls of houses; into city buildings and painted on the city walls.

On one wall, however, some interesting graffiti was drawn in the midst of all the filth – someone had written three words, “Sodom and Gomorrah”. This person was, evidently, aware of the Old Testament.

Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the city of Pompeii perished suddenly, and without warning, by fire. Vesuvius erupted and there was no escape.

Would God do something like that? Would God ever bring judgment to planet earth like He has done in the past?

The apostle Peter answers, “Yes!” as he says, in effect, “We haven’t seen anything yet!”

He writes in II Peter, chapter 2, verses 9b and 10a,

... the unrighteous [are] under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed . . .

Skip to verses 13b through 15a.

... They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes,

reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; forsaking the right way they have gone astray . . .

Skip further to verse 18a.

[They speak] out arrogant words of vanity [and] entice by fleshly desires, [and] sensuality . . .

Later, in chapter 3, verse 7, Peter writes,

But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

Vesuvius is still rumbling. The wrath of God is bound, by His own word, to pour out against sin and the sinner.

We learned in our last discussion from Romans, chapter 2, verse 4, that God is holding back the full venting of His wrath. His forbearance is a temporary truce. His kindness is drawing people to repentance.

Now, it is important to remember Paul's audience:

- In Romans, chapter 1, it was the immoral man who reveled in his sin. If you said to him, "You're a liar and a thief, and the lava of God's judgment is coming," he would say, "So what? That's the way I am and that's the way I want to live and, if that means judgment is coming, so be it."
- In chapter 2, Paul's audience is not the immoral man, but the moral man. You tell the moral man, "You're a liar and a thief and judgment is coming," and he will say, "Now just hold on a second! I'm not perfect, but I'm not that bad. Sure, I've told a little 'white lie' here or there and, yea, I've 'borrowed' a few things in my life, but you should see the good things I've done. And, if you haven't noticed, I'm in church for goodness sakes. Why should I fear the molten lava of God's judgment?!"

To that person, Paul writes in chapter 2, verses 3 and 4,

. . . do you [actually think] . . . that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience . . . ?

Why does the moral man think lightly of God's kindness? Because he does not think he needs it. And why does the moral man think lightly of God's patience? Because he does not think God has needed to be patient with him – because he has been such a good person. "The murderer needs the patience of God, not me!"

He does not see himself like one of those little kids in the grocery store. I saw one, the other day, screaming at the top of his lungs at his frazzled mother. She would not give him that candy bar that the store had purposefully, strategically placed in the checkout lane to intentionally drive mothers to the point of insanity. And that kid was pushing her over the edge. He was kicking his feet against the cart, shaking his head back and forth, and yelling, "I want it, I want it, I want it."

I was one lane over, mentally giving it to him alright! Have you been there too? You are visualizing giving that boy a "whuppin'" he will never forget, right? We *always* know how to discipline someone else's child!

The moral man says, "That's not me. I've never been a problem child to God."

And Paul says, in the last part of verse 4, "You're missing something. It is,

. . . the kindness of God [that] leads you to repentance.

Do you know what repentance is? The Greek word literally means, "a changed mind". You change your mind about yourself; you change your mind about God; you change your mind about your sin. Suddenly, there is brokenness over your sin. You are broken over the fact that you are a liar at heart and, because of that, you tell lies; broken over the fact that you are an adulterer at heart and, because of that, you lust; broken that you are a thief at heart and, because of that, you cheat and steal; broken that you are covetous at heart and, because of that, you live a discontented, greedy life; broken over the fact that you are an idolater at heart and, because of that, you live for yourself.

Paul is trying to show that unbelievers, whether they are immoral or moral, are exactly alike in that they can never come to the point of brokenness over sin. And the upstanding, moral man has a hard time even admitting he sins!

A recent illustration from our national news scene is a classic example of the incredible nature of man to defend himself, even after he has been found to have done something wrong. It involves a

congressman, who has been in the news nearly every day for several months after the disappearance of a woman he was immorally involved with. He is a man who has been involved with others in the past. In a live interview, he said, “I’m not perfect, but I consider myself to be a moral man.”

That is just what Paul would expect to hear. Paul is expecting the moral man to defend himself and say, “I’m basically a good person. God will see everything I’ve done. Yea, there’s some bad stuff, but I’m sure the good stuff will outweigh the bad stuff. I’ll have no problem making it into heaven. I can stand up to the scrutiny of God’s judgment.”

Now Paul has the moral man right where he wants him. “Good.” Paul says, in effect, “You want to be judged by the deeds of your life? That’s exactly what God will one day do. So, let’s look at the deeds of your life now, and allow them to either vindicate or condemn you.”

And what are the deeds of a moral man’s life?

Paul begins to describe it for us in Romans, chapter 2, verses 4 and 5.

. . . do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself . . .

The character of moral man

What Paul does, in these verses, is reveal the true character of moral man.

1. The first characteristic is his word “stubbornness”. You could translate it “hardness”. It is the Greek word “sklerotes” (σκληροτης), which gives us the English medical term “sclerosis”.

We use the word in the same way. We refer to arteriosclerosis as the “hardening of the arteries,” and it is life threatening!

So, Paul says that the moral man has a life threatening condition that is far worse because it will last forever, if it is not cured. It is the “hardening of the heart”.

2. Paul goes on to further describe the heart of moral man in verse 5, when he says the moral man has an “unrepentant heart”.

The word “unrepentant” is the same word from verse 4, where Paul says,

. . . the kindness of God leads you to repentance

It is the same word in verse 5, except that it begins with the letter alpha (α), which reverses the meaning. In verse 4, it means “repentance”. In verse 5, it means “no repentance,” or no brokenness; no change of mind; no change of heart; no change of will; no repentance!

It is the only time this adjective, “unrepentant,” appears in the entire New Testament. A. T. Robertson translated it, “an unreconstructed heart”.

Do you see Paul’s inspired strategy here? On the outside, the moral man looks good. He does not seem to be reveling in the wicked sins of chapter 1. He is not the town drunk; he does not run around painting the town red; he is not sitting in a jail cell. No, he is a member of a church; he teaches a class after school for underprivileged children; he volunteers in the community. On the outside, everything looks wonderful.

So, what Paul does to the moral man is show an X-ray of his heart to him. This is what God, alone, can see.

The Greek word used for heart, in verse 5, is the word “kardia,” which gives us our word, “cardiologist” or “cardiology”. The “kardia” of the unbeliever is pictured as something that is in the process of hardening. That is why it is easier, so to speak, in human terms, to see a child come to faith in Christ than an older person. That is why the average age of salvation, at least in this country, is fourteen years or less.

For those of you who accepted the gospel of Christ and repented of your sin, confessing faith in Christ alone as an adult, oh my what a rare miracle of grace you are. The older you get, the more stubborn you get. The older you get, the more capable you are of defending your sin rather than repenting of your sin.

A search for you to pick up in your personal Bible study sometime, would be to track through the different conditions of the heart. The Bible talks about a stony heart, the rebellious heart, the proud heart, and, in verse 5, the hardened heart. These are the conditions of the heart without Christ.

Moral man looks good and healthy on the outside, but, under the X-ray of God’s holiness, he discovers that he has a fatal heart problem. The divine X-ray reveals, “Mr. Moral Man, you need a heart transplant and only the divine Physician can

give it to you. But first, you have to admit that you're terminal and in need of divine surgery."

And if you do not?

One author wrote, "Hardening of the arteries may take you to the grave, but hardening of the heart will take you to hell."²

The Expanded Reservoir of God's Judgment

Paul is not finished with his diagnosis yet. Look back at verse 5.

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself . . .

Key word "storing up"

The word "storing up" means, "to stockpile little by little". The word has the nuance of a greedy person who carefully, meticulously saves everything for himself, but attempts to look generous and giving.

This is like the woman I read about recently. She was a stingy woman who was finally caught in the act. She was Christmas shopping for one of her family members who lived in another city.

Everything she saw she considered too expensive for her relative – and then, she saw it. On a close-out table was a beautiful, decorative vase that originally cost nearly fifty dollars. It was on sale for two dollars, however, because the handle had been broken off. She bought it and then, told the salesman to wrap it and ship it by mail to the address she handed him. She knew that her relative would think she had bought this expensive vase for her and that it had gotten accidentally broken during shipment. A week after Christmas, she received a thank you note, "Thank you for the lovely vase," the letter read, "and it was so nice of you to wrap each piece separately."

Paul says, "Mr. Moral Man, you think you're getting away with looking good. You think you're storing up good deeds that will one day outweigh the bad deeds. No! What you are actually doing is storing up wrath; that is, you're piling up, you're heaping higher and higher the wrath of God, which will be unleashed upon you because of your stubborn and unrepentant heart."

One author pictured it this way, "This text is a picture of a miser who is unwilling to comprehend that he is collecting the eggs of serpents, bringing them into his warm room, where they will some day hatch all at once and destroy him."³

In other words, Vesuvius is rumbling. Every day you live, every hour you refuse to repent drops another drop into the terrible "treasure" of wrath. And on that day of judgment, the mountain of God's wrath will pour out against you.

There will be, according to verses 5b and 6, an eternal reckoning of God's judgment. Notice those verses.

. . . in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds

J. I. Packer wrote in his book entitled, *Knowing God*, these provocative words,

Would a God who did not care about the difference between right and wrong be a God and admirable Being? Would a God who put no distinction between the beasts of history, the Hitlers and Stalins (if we dare use names), and His own children, be morally praiseworthy and perfect? Moral indifference would be an imperfection of God and to not judge the world would be to show moral indifference. The final proof that God is a perfect moral being is the fact that He has committed Himself to judge the world.⁴

The Exposed Recipients of God's Judgment

Now that Paul has shown the moral man the true condition of his heart, he shows him the true condition of his character. Look at verse 8.

but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

The unbeliever who persists in -

You could summarize the deeds of moral man with three phrases. He stubbornly persists in:

1. selfish ambition; that is, he lives for himself,
2. disobedience to the truth; that is, he considers his opinion greater than God's, and
3. obedience to sin's short term gain; that is, he says, "My life seems to be working out alright, so I'll just ignore the rumbling of that nearby mountain."

My friend, will you hear the rumbling and run to the cross – the place where God's wrath has already poured out over the Lamb of God? You will be safe in Him alone.

You might say, “I don’t know if now is the time. Perhaps I’ll wait a while longer.”

The old Rabbi Eliazer used to say to his students, “Repent one day before you die.”

His students would ask “How can we do that? Who knows on what day he will die?”

“Exactly my point,” Eliazer would respond, “all the more reason to repent today.”⁵

The believer who perseveres in -

Now I want you to notice the character of the believer, whose life stands in contrast to the unbeliever, in verse 7.

To those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life

By the way, the world should be able to tell the difference between you and an unbeliever, not in what you believe, but in how you behave. Frankly, they do not care what creed you can quote, they only know how you talk at work. They hear the values you communicate.

Now, stop for a moment. Some would say, “See, in this paragraph it seems to imply that a person goes to heaven because of his good works, just as this moral man is going to hell because of his works.”

You need to remember that Paul, in Romans, chapter 2, is not defining the basis for salvation. He is defining the basis for judgment. The basis for salvation is faith in Christ alone. The basis for judgment is works – for both believer and unbeliever.

The believer will stand at the bema seat of God’s judgment, as II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 10, tells us. His works will be judged, not to see if he will get into heaven, but to see how he lived in the light of heaven.

The unbeliever will stand at the great white throne judgment, as Revelation, chapter 20, verse 11, reveals, not to *see* if he is going to hell, but to understand why he *is*.

What Paul is doing in verses 5 through 8, is showing the contrast between the lifestyles of those who are going to heaven and those who are going to hell. And may I add this, if you are living like someone who is going to hell, you have every reason to doubt whether you are going to heaven.

It is one thing to practice righteous living and fail. That is the description of the believer in Romans, chapter 7. It is another thing to not care

about God’s standard of righteousness and to practice a lifestyle of sin, while, at the same time, claiming to be a Christian. For those who claim to know Christ, but live as if they do not know Him, it is not my responsibility to give that person hope, but to warn them that they may have no hope.

True faith in Christ brings salvation, yet at the same time, true faith reveals itself through good works. Paul wrote, in Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 10,

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

In other words, good works are not the *condition* for salvation, they are the *consequences* of salvation.

You ask, “What about the person who claims to have prayed the prayer to receive Christ, but no longer cares about living for Christ?”

The apostle John dealt with that same question about some who had abandoned the faith and openly rebelled against the Lord, even though, at one time, they were part of the church and seemingly related to Christ. Let me read his answer to that question, in I John, chapter 2, verse 19.

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.

What is the lifestyle of true faith? Paul wrote in Titus, chapter 2, verse 14,

. . . that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

In other words, true faith will produce zeal for good works. That means that the utter lack of righteous zeal indicates the lack of real faith.

Now, what are those righteous deeds that will be evident in the life of the believer? Look at Romans, chapter 2, verse 7, again.

to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life

Let me summarize that verse with three characteristics. The believer, though not perfect, persistently perseveres in:

1. seeking the glory of God,
2. pursuing honor with passion, and

3. living for eternity's long term reward.

Now, the text says,

[they] seek for immortality . . .

Some have misunderstood the word for "immortality" to imply that only believers are immortal and unbelievers are not immortal after death. Ladies and gentlemen, the Bible teaches that the soul of every person is immortal – facing either everlasting joy in heaven or everlasting torment in hell.

The word "immortality," in verse 7, simply means, "incorruption". It appears in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 42, in reference to the resurrection body of the believer that is exempt from any spoil or corruption. So, the glorified eternal body of the believer does not face corruption, torment, and eternal degradation, but eternal purity, glory, and bliss.

Can the person, who has escaped the wrath of God and enjoys forgiveness and the promise of heaven forever, do anything other than seek the glory and honor of God through godly living?!

Isn't that simply living out the words, "Thank you, oh God, for saving me from your wrath and fury. Thank you that the mountain of your judgment will never pour out fury and judgment against me. I do not fear another Vesuvius of eternal wrath. I am safe in Jesus Christ."

I read the story of an old man, who lived in Florida, that everyone referred to as "Old Ed". Every Friday evening, as the sun began to set over the water, Old Ed would come strolling along the beach to his favorite pier. He would be carrying a bucket full of shrimp, not for him, but for the seagulls. Old Ed would walk to the end of the pier and soon, the sky would become crowded with screeching, squawking birds who would surround him. He would throw the shrimp to them, and people said he would talk to them while he did it – just mumbling under his breath. Within minutes, the bucket would be empty

and Old Ed would stand there, deep in thought, watching the birds fly away.

His full name was Eddie Rickenbacker. He was a captain in World War II and flew a B-17. He, and seven other men, were sent on a mission across the Pacific. Their plane crashed in the water and, miraculously, they all made it out of the plane and into their life raft. Aboard that raft, for days on end, they fought the sun and the sharks. They also fought hunger and their rations finally ran out. Things grew desperate. As Ed sat semi-conscious, his hat pulled down over his eyes, something landed on his head. It was a seagull. That gull meant food – if he could catch it. He slowly reached up and caught it. The men made a meal of that bird and then, used the leftovers for fish bait. They caught fish and were able to survive until they were rescued. Old Ed never forgot. Every Friday evening, for years until he died, he would go to that pier with a bucket full of shrimp. He would feed the seagulls and repeat to them over and over again, "Thank you . . . thank you . . . thank you."⁶

Can we do any less toward our Savior – Who rescued us from the future eruption of God's eternal wrath? Can we do anything less with our lips, our lives, and our hearts than say, live for, and honor our Redeemer with a life that says to Him, "Thank you . . . thank you . . . thank you."⁷

¹ Nelson's Complete Book of Quotes, p. 504

² John MacArthur Jr., Without Excuse (Panorama City, California, The Master's Communications, 1990), p. 35

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), p. 31

⁴ J. I. Packer, Knowing God, quoted by Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, p. 504

⁵ David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Commentary (Clarksville, Massachusetts, Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 334

⁶ Max Lucado, In the Eye of the Storm, quoted by Charles Swindoll in The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Chicago, Moody Press, 1998), p. 486

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