

## Bridging Niagara

The Depravity of Man . . . The Deliverance of God – Part VIII

Romans 3:19-20

### Introduction

In 1848, Charles Ellet, an American engineer, was considered to be out of his mind. He believed that a suspension bridge could be built across the raging rapids formed by the Niagara Falls. Charles Ellet planned to build a bridge upstream from the great Niagara Falls, where thirty-seven million gallons of water plunged over the edge every sixty seconds. Over time, the water that roared over the edge of the falls had cut a deep abyss into the rock basin below. It then flowed onward, in turbulent whitewater rapids, to that upstream area known as the Niagara Gorge. Charles Ellet planned to bridge that gorge.

Disaster, however, was nearly universally predicted, as the gorge was 825 feet across and dropped 200 feet straight down. Since there was no way that bridge supports could survive the raging current there, Ellet was convinced that the only kind of bridge to build was a suspension bridge. This, however, was a fairly tenuous idea. The suspension bridges that had been built, in different parts of the world, did not last very long. In fact, the great suspension bridge that had been built over the Ohio River had collapsed after only a few years.

To even begin construction, how in the world could an engineer attach a cable from the American side of the gorge all the way over to the Canadian side? Ellet solved that problem ingeniously, by offering a reward of a five dollar bill to the first person to fly a kite across the chasm. The competition was so intense on the first day that the sky was filled with kites. No one succeeded,

however. On the second day, though, young Mr. Walsh won the prize. The string of his kite was fastened to a tree on the far side of the gorge, with a light cord attached to it that was pulled slowly back over. Next, came a heavier cord, followed by a rope, and then, a heavier rope, until finally, a steel cable that made its way across the Niagara Gorge.

When the cable was securely fastened on either side of the gorge, Ellet decided to demonstrate his faith in an unforgettable fashion. He built an iron basket and attached it to the cable with a series of pulleys. Then he got inside and pulled himself across, becoming the first man in history to ever cross the great chasm from above. He wrote, “The wind was high and the weather cold, but the trip was a very interesting one to me, perched up as I was 240 feet above the rapids, viewing from the very center of the river, the great Niagara Falls.”

A few weeks later, he completed a catwalk with wooden slats. He announced another demonstration, gathered a huge crowd, leaped into a small horse-drawn carriage, and rumbled fearlessly onto the tiny bridge which, as yet, did not have any guardrails. Standing straight up like a charioteer, Ellet drove the carriage across the bridge which swayed fearfully. Women fainted, the crowd was dumbstruck, and, in the end, the applause could be heard above the roar of the surging water below.

The unthinkable had happened. From a kite string, to a steel cabled suspension marvel of engineering – Niagara had been bridged. A gateway between America and Canada was formed.<sup>i</sup>

### The Great Chasm

If you wanted, you could easily take your pen and summarize everything we have learned from the middle of Romans chapter 1, through the middle of Romans chapter 3, with one phrase, *The Great Chasm*.

### **Romans Chapter 1 – Man Worships Nature**

In Romans, chapter 1, we learned that man refuses to believe the testimony of creation as a universal finger pointing to a Creator.

### **Romans Chapter 2 – Man Worships His Own Morality**

In chapter 2, we learned that man also, stubbornly resists the testimony of his conscience that whispers to him that he is a sinner and that he will one day be judged not only for his public sins, but his secret sins.

### **Romans Chapter 3 – Man Worships Himself**

In chapter 3, we learned that man does not run toward God, he runs away from God; mankind does not respect God, he reviles God; mankind does not understand spiritual things, he does not really want spiritual truth. Mankind will say some nice things about God, and perhaps even show up at some church, where organ music softly plays and people go through prayers and spiritual motions; just as long as God does not get pushy; just as long as God does not demand anything or claim the right of ownership.

Man must worship something, however, so Paul tells us in Romans:

- chapter 1 – man worships nature;
- chapter 2 – man worships his own moral effort;
- chapter 3 – man worships himself.

Nearly the entirety of these three chapters, which form the first major section in the book of Romans, Paul has merely described the abyss of human depravity; he has shown the chasm between man and God. He simply holds up the mirror of divine revelation and says to sinful mankind, “Here, take a good long look. This is who you are.”

And, it does no good to get mad at a mirror – it never lies.

Recently, my eight-year-old daughter, Charity, had a friend over for a sleepover. “Sleepover,” by the way, is a compound word that contradicts itself –

sleep has nothing to do with coming over! They finally settled and got quiet around 3 a.m. Charity had asked me to make pancakes in the morning and I had promised I would, but I was sure it would never happen because they would need to sleep late. They were up at 6 a.m., as frisky as those little puppies we used to have. The only problem was, I could not put them in the backyard and tie them to a tree – which crossed my mind.

I made the pancakes and soon, the doorbell rang. The other girl’s father was there to pick her up. I noticed he gave me a funny look, so, after he left, I went back to the bathroom to look in the mirror. I was wearing my old brown terry cloth robe and my hair was literally, sticking straight out – it was all down in my eyes – okay, so it was not in my eyes! I looked at myself in the mirror and laughed and then thought, “Now there’s a lovely sight!”

The truth is, we all spent time this morning getting ready, simply because we did not want the world to panic when they saw us. Never for a minute this morning, did you argue with the mirror and say, “Listen, I know I really don’t look that bad!”

No. You believed the mirror’s reflection and took drastic steps to improve that reflection of the truth.

You can argue all you want, but in each of these three chapters of Romans, Paul holds up the divine mirror and reveals to mankind his true reflection. Let us look at the truths that these reflections reveal.

- In chapter 1, verses 29 through 32, he describes mankind,

*being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, . . .*

(in other words, although they intuitively know right from wrong)

*. . . that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.*

- In chapter 2, verses 4 through 6,

*Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance 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 in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds*

- In chapter 3, verses 10 through 18,

*As it is written, “There is none righteous, not even one;*

*There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God;*

*All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.”*

*“Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving,” “The poison of asps is under their lips”;*

*“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness”;*

*“Their feet are swift to shed blood,*

*Destruction and misery are in their paths,*

*And the path of peace they have not known.”*

*“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

That is the inspired revelation of humanity; the divine description of the great chasm that ultimately, separates sinful man from a holy God. That is the raging whitewater of sinfulness; the Niagara Gorge that no man will ever be able to leap across. No matter how fast he runs, no matter how sincere his heart, no matter how far he jumps, he cannot make it across this great chasm – he must have a bridge.

## **All of the World Will Become Accountable to God**

Paul now summarizes all that he has said with one sentence. Notice verse 19 of Romans, chapter 3.

*Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God*

Did you hear that? This is the very thing the world resists; the very thing the world hates to consider will one day happen, and that is, all of the world will become, before God, accountable.

The word “accountable,” is “hupodikos” in the Greek. This is the only time in the Greek New

Testament that the word appears. It is a compound word, “hupo,” meaning, “under,” and “dike,” meaning, “the sentence of justice”. In other words, this word is revealing that the world is, “under the sentence of divine justice”.

Cremer writes, “It speaks of one who is bound to suffer what is imposed for the sake of justice, because he has neglected to do what is right.”

Abbott-Smith defines it as, “someone who is brought to trial.”

Paul is saying that all of the world will be brought to trial before God and is, even now, under the judgment of God; guilty before God. It is a sweeping statement that takes in all of humanity outside of Jesus Christ.<sup>ii</sup>

Now, did you notice, in this future scene, that everyone has their chance to articulate their defense? No! Verse 19b, tells us,

*. . . every mouth [will] be closed . . .*

This is the exact opposite of a court of human law, where there is expert defense. It is a trial by our peers, and our peers are also sinful. They can excuse sinful behavior, as well as be bribed and influenced toward the wrong verdict. Even the judges are not always upright in their decisions; they can also make mistakes. There are innocent people in prison today. Correctly exercising and interpreting human law is the goal of our courts, but it is not automatically guaranteed. It is inexact, imperfect, and has loopholes. We can plead extenuating circumstances, and, even if we lose our case, we can appeal to a higher court, and then again, to an even higher court.

“Even if we exhaust our legal options,” Kent Hughes writes, “we can write letters, we can even write a book . . . we can argue . . . we can refuse to be silenced!”<sup>iii</sup>

This is not the case in the courtroom scene that Paul is describing, however. This is a reference to the coming judgment of all of humanity who are without Jesus Christ as their defense, when they stand before God at the great white throne.

John records what this scene will be like, in Revelation, chapter 20, verses 11 through 15.

*Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life;*

*and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Before this throne, there will be no defense, no series of alibis, no excuses – just silence! God cannot be bribed; it is not a trial by peers, but a trial by Providence; there are no extenuating circumstances for sin, God was an eyewitness to everything we ever did, or said, or even thought.

Before this God there is silence, for all of the world will brought to a final understanding that there is a chasm between God and man. Man had no other hope than to cross the bridge that God provided through Jesus Christ. Instead, they denied Him; mocked Him; or added Him to their lives with their other hobbies. They did not confess to Him their sinfulness nor enthrone Him on their hearts.

Paul writes that standing before Him, there is silence. And, it is too late to pray. Paul declares that man is indefensible; he is silent before God. Man is indefensible because man is inexcusable.

Why is that? Notice Romans, chapter 3, verse 20, for the answer to that question.

*because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*

In other words, no one will ever get into heaven by keeping the Law – because no one can. In fact, one of the reasons God gave the Law was to simply prove to mankind that he could not keep it. Paul says, in this verse,

*. . . for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*

That does not excuse our sin, it just reveals that we are sinners.

J. B. Phillips was a British scholar who paraphrased the New Testament. I have a copy of it in my library. Because he was English, he occasionally threw new light on a passage through his use of British terms to explain concepts. One example of this is Romans, chapter 3, verse 20. In England, in his generation, what Americans call a

ruler was called a straightedge. So, when Phillips paraphrased, in this verse, “. . . for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin,” he wrote, “. . . indeed it is the straightedge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are.”

Have you ever tried to hang wallpaper? Have you ever tried to hang wallpaper decorated with stripes? That will destroy your marriage! Stay away from stripes! I am not speaking from experience, of course. Have you ever hung wallpaper with stripes and thought you were doing a pretty good job, until you came to a corner or a window? Suddenly, you realized you were hanging it crooked. You probably fussed and fumed that the wall was crooked, right? It may have been, but more than likely, you were hanging the wallpaper crooked.

The straightedge of that window frame cannot straighten the wallpaper. It can only reveal that your wallpaper has been hung crooked.

To return to the analogy of the mirror, that also acts as the Law. While that mirror can, with absolute precision, reveal your dirty face, it cannot wash your face. It can show that you need to shave your stubble, comb your hair, and brush your teeth, but it cannot shave, or comb, or brush anything.

The function of the mirror is to compel you; to silently challenge and encourage you to pick up the washcloth, the razor, the comb, and the brush, but it cannot clean you – it is powerless to clean any dirt or stubble away.<sup>iv</sup>

In the same way, the Law is God's gift to us – not to make us guilty, but to show us why we are. And, those who say, “Well, I'm going to get into heaven because I am really trying to keep the Law,” or “I'm going to get into heaven because I'm moral, upstanding, and living clean,” are asking the mirror to wash their face.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Law can challenge your life, but it cannot change your life. It can even condemn you, but it cannot convert you.<sup>v</sup>

The Law can show you how crooked and dirty you are, but it is powerless to wash any sin away.

## Conclusion

You need to understand that Paul is about to introduce the Savior to the sinner, but first, he is introducing the sinner to his need for a Savior.

He has described, in living color, the great chasm between God and man; the terrible abyss created by the sinfulness and depravity of mankind.

Paul, however, will begin to describe the divine connection between God and man in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the sinless Man; the sum and substance of almighty God. He will describe:

- The little kite string that spanned the abyss of human sin and despair as Christ's virgin birth. Jesus came as a little tiny baby; the incarnation of God in the flesh.
- Next, that the kite string pulled, across the hopelessness of mankind, the heavier string of Christ's blameless and sinless life. Jesus is the unblemished Lamb of God.
- Then, a rope pulled across the abyss that was Christ's miraculous authentication of His deity and the validity of His message
- An even heavier rope next, that was Christ's death on the cross, perfectly fulfilling the prophecies and paying the penalty for mankind's sin.
- Finally, the steel cable pulled across the impassable chasm that anchored the bridge forever that was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

This bridge of life could be and would be constructed upon and through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, according to John, chapter 14, verse 6,

*. . . I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.*

In other words, no one can cross the Niagara of human despair and depravity, unless they walk over, as it were, on the One who bridged that Niagara – the Lord Jesus Christ.

In chapter 3, verses 19 and 20, Paul finishes the first section of his letter to the Romans and he has accomplished his goal. In this first section, the whole world has been brought before the judgment of God, with the realization that they have no hope, nor excuse, nor defense before the jury of God's holiness. And, in that awful realization, the whole world stands before God, silent. There is no higher court of appeal. They do not have a prayer.

That is still in the future, however. Today, my friend, you do have a prayer, if you will pray it.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/5/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Lewis, The Church of Irresistible Influence (Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), p. 33.

<sup>ii</sup> Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker Book House, 1974), p. 151.

<sup>iii</sup> R. Kent Hughes, Romans (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 324.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>v</sup> Ralph Lauren, Romans: Where Life Begins (Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 118.