



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.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 2:1-16

Lord, as I read this section, let it speak to my life. Give me a new awareness of the excuses I make and my responsibility to listen to my conscience. I ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen.

For Review:

1. What attributes of God can be “clearly perceived” (1:20) even by people who are not Christians or Bible readers?

2. What did humans lose in their rebellious “exchanges” (1:23-28)?

What did they gain?

Romans 2:1-3

3. What’s the most frequently used pronoun in 1:26-32? _____

In these three verses? _____

What do you think is the reason for the change?

4. According to verse 3 and Matthew 7:1-5, what is the great danger that attends passing judgment on others?
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5. In your experience, what are some of the reasons outsiders “like Jesus but not the church” (as author Dan Kimball asserts)?
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Romans 2:4-11

6. God’s “kindness” (v. 4) has a long-term purpose. What is it?
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7. Are you personally more motivated to change your behavior because of the threat of punishment or because of someone’s patient kindness?
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8. In verse 5 and again in verse 16, Paul speaks of a special day when God will judge. What do we learn about that day in the following references from the prophets?

Joel 2:31

Amos 5:18–20

Obadiah 15

Zephaniah 1:14–18

9. What do we learn about God the Judge in:

2:4

2:5

2:11

10. Does 2:6 contradict 1:16? If not, how are the two passages related?

Romans 2:12–16

11. To whom is Paul referring with the words, “all who have sinned without the law”?

To whom when he says “all who have sinned under the law”?

12. In Romans 1:16, salvation comes to “the Jew first and also to the Greek.” According to 2:9, what else comes to “the Jew first and also the Greek”?

13. To me, “conscience” is (circle all that apply):

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| a) a jangling alarm bell | d) an effective deterrent |
| b) a quiet warning light | e) a nuisance |
| c) always at work | f) something I rarely notice |

14. How has this lesson helped you take a closer look at yourself?

Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 2:

Romans 2:4 *Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*