

COMING UNDER GRACE

iii. Truth and Tragedy

Romans 1:18 - 23

The question is often asked, not unnaturally, whether the extremely dark picture of human life presented here is not grossly unfair. However, what Paul says here is meant to be understood on the basis of 1:16b, 17 depicting the perfect righteousness of Christ received as a free gift, and 3:10,23. 'There is no one who is righteous, not even one' and 'All have sinned and lack the glory of God.' In other words, it is not simply Paul's judgement of his contemporaries here, but the gospel's judgement of all people. It is not a description of especially bad people only, but the innermost truth of all of us, as we are in ourselves.

'The wrath of God is revealed against unrighteousness,' just as 'the righteousness of God' is a matter of divine revelation. The revelation of God's righteousness is more than providing information; it mediates God's power for salvation. Similarly, the revelation of God's wrath is more than imparting information, it has definite expression in history and at the close of the age. The human predicament is not lack of knowledge about God but failure to acknowledge him and render appropriate worship and obedience.

Instead of accepting itself as made in God's image, humanity feverishly tries to reverse the order and remake God in its image. Although God made humanity free to refuse him, he did not make it free from the consequences of its refusal. Drama and literature speak of a 'tragic flaw' which prevents a hero and heroine fulfilling their potential. Psychology speaks of the 'human predicament' arising from wrong choices. Sociology contends that people are victims of social, hereditary or environmental circumstances.

Paul, however, highlights a more active role of humanity in its misfortune. Paul speaks of a knowing 'suppression of the truth by their wickedness' (v18), having 'exchanged the truth about God for a lie' (v25). God has made known that which otherwise could not be known. 'God has made it plain.' Three times more he asserts that humanity can know God and does in fact experience God (vv19,21,32). In fifteen verses Paul refers twelve times to the manifestation or knowableness of God's power and divine nature. In spite of this, humanity has chosen neither to glorify nor to give thanks to God (v21).

The distortion of the relationship between humanity and God results in idolatry (vv19-23). The second disruption results in immorality (vv24-

27). The third and final disruption results in human relationships characterized by strife and greed (vv28-32). In each case God's response to human refusal is the same: three times "God gave them over" to the wretchedness they desired (vv24,26,28). Fallen humans are natural 'spin doctors'. For Paul, the surest sign of original sin is our infinite capacity for rationalization. Our entire self is affected by sin, in extent not degree.

In the gospel, the divine mercy and the divine judgement are inseparable. The wrath of God, his holy hostility to evil, is the wrath of him who is perfectly loving, perfectly good. As long as God is God, he cannot be indifferent to his creation being destroyed and his holy will defiantly resisted. Accordingly, balancing the welcome of sinners and maintaining God's standards is perhaps the most difficult task of the church.

However, God's wrath is neither the first nor the last word, grace is: 'And that is what some of you were [under God's wrath due to sin]. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Cor 6:11).

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