

# **BELIEVERS BIBLE BULLETIN**

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## **ROMANS**

### **Lesson 4**

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Romans 1:24-32

## **"God Gave Them Up," or Divine Retribution**

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### **Introduction**

Preaching to his Sunday congregation in Bern, Switzerland, at the Munster on Romans 1:18-32, Walter Luthi said, "In the words that we have just read we are told the whole truth about our condition. There may well be people among us who cannot bear to hear the truth, and would like to creep quietly away out of this church. Let them do so if they wish."<sup>1</sup> There is much justification for Luthi's words, for Paul's canvas upon which he has painted his picture--dark, foreboding, threatening, flashing with lightning and crashing with thunder--is crammed with forms and figures, lights and shadows, of sin, wrath, and judgment. And the revelation of wrath is total and complete, encompassing all and rendering all without excuse and under condemnation, both individually and collectively.

Isaiah has spoken of judgment as God's "strange work" and His "strange act" (cf. Isa. 28:21), and the idea that it is strange because contrary to His goodness and grace, while a popular contemporary misunderstanding of his words, is not only out of harmony with the context of Isaiah 28:21, but it also does not agree with the total picture of the being and attributes of God in Scripture. His retributive justice is one of His essential properties, and in this passage in Romans it comes to the center of the stage. In the threefold paredoken (AV,

"gave up"; vv. 24, 26, 28) the problem is plainly before the reader. It is the primary purpose of this sermon to analyze and, if possible, clarify the meaning of the term, setting it within the context of the theology of the being and attributes of God.

The apostle has introduced his message of the gospel to the Romans in the opening section (cf. vv. 1-17). His theme is that gospel (cf. vv. 16-17). In the following words, he began his development of the case history of human sin and condemnation (cf. vv. 18-23). The section, while beginning in 1:18 does not conclude until 3:20, and in it Paul moves from the declaration of Gentile sin (1:18-32) through Jewish sin (2:1—3:8) to the climax of the apostolic diagnosis that "all the world" is guilty, with every mouth stopped, speechless in the terror of condemnation before a holy and righteous God (3:9-20).

In the immediate context Paul, in his endeavor to prove that the only righteousness available to man is that obtained by faith, declared that God's displeasure toward sin has been revealed from heaven (1:18). It follows, of course, that all who are charged with ungodliness or unrighteousness stand under His wrath and cannot obtain acceptance before God by their character or conduct. That the Gentiles are guilty and, therefore, inexcusable is evident, because they have enjoyed a revelation of God's eternal power and deity and yet have rejected it (1:19-20). And not only have they rejected the light of this truth, they have given themselves up to idolatry (1:21-23). The Pauline picture of the religious history of mankind is one of retrogression, not progression, of devolution, not evolution, downward, not upward. In unbelief man has passed from light to futility to folly. Thus, the divine wrath has found its justification in human rejection of "the truth of God" (1:18, 25).

Put simply, man's problem is sin, the little three-letter word that has been banned from our conversations, "X" rated, a verbum non gratum. Man loves to trace his predicament to every other conceivable

alternative but the one that satisfies the situation. Our difficulties are traced to "the frontier spirit" by which our country was settled, characterized as they were by violence. Others trace our difficulties to the "permissiveness" of the day, the motion picture industry, or to the media and its choice of the news it disseminates. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, his supposed assassin was called everything but a sinner. The situation, someone has pointed out, is similar to a man floating down the Niagara River toward the falls, after having ventured too near the edge and fallen in, who analyzes his fatal destiny as due to the steep incline in the river bed, or the terrible power of the water, or his inability to swim to shore (or upstream), or that he was too far from the rocks in the water, or no one was throwing a line to him. The reason was his unbelief in his danger and his fall.

When one compares the American faith in the natural goodness of man and the endlessness of material progress, then one ought to be grateful for the honesty of the biblical picture.

As Buttrick has put it, "The man in the street is on the side of the Bible. He has deeper insight than philosophers: he knows that 'there is something wrong with the world.' Bible pages are bloody--because men are violent. Bible pages tell of patriarchs visiting prostitutes--for human story has never been free of that stigma. There is no Pollyanna in Scripture, and for that we may be thankful: she is a revoltingly sugary child."<sup>2</sup>

Divine retribution is a fact that men must face, and Paul introduces his readers to the teaching in the section that concludes chapter one of his greatest work. We turn to it now, asking that God give us insight and courage to face our human dilemma honestly.

### **GIVEN UP TO UNCLEANNES**

Romans 1:18 is the title verse of the charge that the Gentiles are under sin. They are accused of ungodliness and unrighteousness.

Ungodliness is the religious word, and it is best seen in the idolatry of vv. 21-23. Unrighteousness is the moral term, and it is best seen in the immorality pictured in vv.24-32, the section to which we are turning. Man's sin, just as the prodigal's, begins in the darkness of unbelief, but issues in the wickedness of immorality. Somewhere Warfield commented, "Men's religions are their worst crimes." It was a perceptive comment and pointed to the beginning of sin in man's relation to the Word of God.

On the truth that perversion in life arises from perversion in faith, a sentiment that undergirds all that Paul says here, Luthi has written', "Our moral perversion is not the cause but the result of wickedness, the consequence of a more deep-seated evil. However justifiable they may be, sermons on morals are therefore of little value, because they do not get to the root of the matter. Paul sets to work more thoroughly. All the perversions of life, he says, can be traced back to one fundamental cause, and this original sin is not to be found in the field of morals, but in the soil of religion: perversion in life arises from perversion in faith."<sup>3</sup>

The dio (AV, "wherefore") of verse 24 makes the connection with the preceding. In the light of the rebellion just described in verses 18 through 23 the inference of vindictory judgment is drawn. Sin justly brings judgment, a judgment expressed most clearly in the following verses of this final section of chapter one.

In vv. 24-25 the apostle states that, since men did not worship God as God, exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and worshiping and serving the creation rather than the Creator, God gave them over to uncleanness. And that brings us to the essence, the heart, the Leit Motif of the passage and the judgment of God expressed in the threefold occurrence of the word paredoken (AV, "gave up," vv. 24, 26; "gave over," v.28). The repetition is like a terrible refrain.<sup>4</sup> Over its meaning there has raged considerable debate, and we now turn to a

consideration of the three major viewpoints in the interpretation of God's giving over of men.

First, perhaps the favorite interpretation of the term is that which has prevailed since the time of Origen and Chrysostom, in which the paredoken is taken in the permissive sense. According to this view God passively permitted men to fall into the retributive consequences of their infidelity and apostasy. The active voice of the verb is surely contrary to this view. It is not said that God permitted rebellious men to fall into uncleanness and bodily dishonor. It is said that He actively, although justly in view of their sin, consigned them to the consequences of their acts. It is His divine arrangement that men by their apostasy should fall into moral impurity, sin being punished by further sin, and He himself maintains the moral connection between apostasy and impurity by carrying out the judgment Himself.

Second, another popular view, which became current after the time of Augustine, takes the word, "gave up," in a privative sense. According to this interpretation God deprived man of an aspect of His work of common grace. He withdrew His hand that had restrained men from evil. Godet has expressed and illustrated this interpretation about as well as it can be set forth. "Wherein did His action consist?" he asks. And the answer follows, "He positively withdrew His hand; He ceased to hold the boat as it was dragged by the current of the river. This is the meaning of the term used by the apostle, Acts xiv. 16: 'He suffered the Gentiles to walk in their own ways,' by not doing for them what He never ceased to do for His own people. It is not a case of simple abstention, it is the positive withdrawal of a force."<sup>5</sup>

At bottom this view is the practical equivalent of the permissive view. This is evident from the fact that Godet uses Acts 14:16 as illustrative of the sense. However, in that passage the verb used is eiasen (AV, "suffered"), which normally means simply to permit. The Pauline language seems stronger than this. The expression, "God gave them

up to uncleanness," describes a judicial act,<sup>6</sup> a "judicial abandonment."<sup>7</sup> The active force of the verb must not be glossed over.

Therefore, finally, it becomes clear that the term must be given a judicial sense. The meaning is not simply that God withdrew from the wicked the restraining force of His providence and common grace, although that privative sense is included in the judicial sense, but that He positively gave men over to the judgment of "more intensified and aggravated cultivation of the lusts of their own hearts with the result that they reap for themselves a correspondingly greater toll of retributive vengeance."<sup>8</sup> The usage of the word in both this epistle (cf. 4:25; 6:17; 8:32) and in the other Pauline epistles (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20) supports this force.

There is another striking occurrence of the identical form of the verb in Ephesians 4:19, and that passage serves to remind the interpreter that the infliction of punitive justice does not compromise the free agency and responsibility of man. In that passage Paul, speaking of the sin of the Gentiles, writes, "Who being past feeling have given themselves over (Gr., paredoken) unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness." In the midst of the retributive action of God there is no coercion of man. God does not entice or compel to evil. Man remains responsible and can even be said to be giving himself over to uncleanness while God gives him up to the judgment of his sin.

There is a popular saying to the effect that God made man in His own image, but now man is returning the compliment by making his gods in his own image. That saying receives some support from Paul's words here, and one can see that the consequences of that action are deadly.

### **GIVEN UP TO VILE PASSIONS**

The apostle turns to the theme of homosexuality, as relevant a topic to our day as one can find in Scripture. As a result of apostasy from the faith the race was given over to the judgment of unnatural sexual

practices, both among the women and the men. The words, "for this cause" (cf. v. 26) make the connection with the preceding, that is, verse 25.<sup>9</sup> The words that Paul uses to describe the women and the men are words that mean essentially females and males. In other words, they stress the sexuality of individuals"! He looks derogatorily at them as sex-animals.

The theme of homosexuality and its judgment begins with the women, which some have attributed to the apostle's leaning upon the Genesis account. There the judgment of God after the fall comes first upon the woman. That may be difficult to prove, but it still may be correct. One thing may be said. The emphasis upon the women's involvement points to the degradation of human sin in the divine judgment. Shedd is right, "The sex which is naturally most shamefaced is in this instance the most shameless. 'A shameless woman is the worst of men' (Young.)<sup>10</sup> Thus, by the use of the term females, not women, and the involvement of women stress is laid upon the animalism of the sin. Even animals might be offended by this, if they were sentient beings, for they are usually monogamous.

In speaking of "the natural use of the woman" Paul makes it plain, as does the whole Bible, that the propriety of the sex act is grounded in the natural constitution of males and females established by God. Homosexuality is, therefore, an offence against God and His order, as both testaments make clear.

It should not be forgotten that the vile passions set forth here are the results of God's judgment upon the race. "A celebrated actor," Shedd remarks, "on walking through the syphilitic ward of a hospital, remarked: 'God Almighty writes a legible hand.'"<sup>11</sup> It was said of Julius Caesar, "He was every woman's man," a remark that pointed to the vileness of his moral life. In our day films, plays, clubs, and even churches, glorify the homosexual. It is simply further evidence of the judgment of God upon our society.

### **GIVEN UP TO A REPROBATE MIND**

The final section of chapter one lays stress on the mental sins of men, rather than the sensual. It concludes with one of the most damning texts in the Bible, "Who, knowing the judgment of God, that they who commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same but have pleasure in them that do them" (v. 32). There are absolute standards that come down to us from heaven, and one of them is the wrath of God upon human sin. "Respecting the guilt of the heathen," Shedd points out, "the criterion laid down by St. Paul is also concisely stated in James iv. 17: 'To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.' Wherever the individual's character and conduct fail to come up to the individual's knowledge, there is sin. Any rational creature who knows more than he puts in practice is ipso facto guilty."<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There is hardly any passage in the Bible that says plainer than this one that moral depravity is the result of the judgment of God. And this raises an interesting question that concerns the present moral condition of the nations, and particularly the United States of America. The question is this: What is the real significance of the spread of immorality, crime, and violence in western civilization? To compound the problem, the newspapers are filled with stories of clergymen encouraging sexual license. Many Christian ministers, contrary to the Apostle Paul's teaching, no longer regard homosexuality and other sexual aberrations as sin. It is rather a sickness, or a weakness. In an article in one of the national news magazines a few years ago homosexuality was referred to by the author as "an undesirable handicap."<sup>13</sup> To many today it is nothing more than a deviation from the customary sexual patterns, a third sex. Occasionally, in what must seem to the Christian the ultimate evil, homosexuality is traced to God Himself, for, it is said, He made men and women what they are!

Some thirty years ago or so the famous Harvard sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, in his book, *The Crisis of our Age*, warned that increases in crime, suicides, mental breakdowns, revolutions, and war have been symptoms of civilizations in the midst of death pangs. In another article on homosexuals in *Time* magazine the author wrote, "At their fullest flowering, the Persian, Greek, Roman and Moslem civilizations permitted a measure of homosexuality; as they decayed, it became more prevalent."<sup>14</sup> Later Sorokin in his *The American Sex Revolution* pointed out that sex anarchy leads to mental breakdowns, rather than the other way around, as the Freudian psychologists have taught.<sup>15</sup> Further, he pointed out that increasing sexual license leads to decreasing creativity and productivity in the intellectual, artistic, and economic spheres of life.

What, then, are the sources of the problems of the present age? As Howard indicates, "Spengler had a biological answer: civilizations grow old and die like any other living thing. Toynbee has a religious answer: civilizations fail to respond to the higher challenges of the Spirit and therefore fossilize. In his *Civilization and Ethics* Albert Schweitzer tried to find an ethical answer. St. Paul had still a different answer."<sup>16</sup>

The Pauline answer is plain, and Romans 1:24 expresses it most impressively and succinctly. When man rebelled and sinned, God "gave them up" to uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts that by their own activities their bodies might be dishonored. In other words, sexual rebellion, license, and anarchy is the retributive judgment of God. The civilization of the western world, including the particular civilization of the United States of America, is not a civilization in danger of contracting a fatal disease. That civilization has already contracted a malignant and fatal cancer through its unbelief of the message of God in Christ. It is now hurrying on with increasing speed to final climactic destruction. Civilizations do not die because of violence, crime, immorality, and anarchy. These things are evidences

that death already is at work, a death brought on by disobedience to the revelation of God.

It should be carefully noted that the apostle is not speaking of eternal punishment in these verses (vv. 24, 26, 28). He writes of a judgment that pertains to this life. On the other hand, it is also plain that Paul's words lead on to the doctrine of everlasting torment (cf. v. 32). The vindictory judgment inflicted by God is continued in the life to come in a more terrible and permanent form if the escape through the gospel of the cross is neglected.

To the question sometimes posed by soft-hearted men, "Can God really give man up to judgment?" this passage provides a resounding "yes" answer. But, in fact, it is not the final and convincing answer to the question. That comes from the cross of Jesus Christ, which in the cry it elicits from our Lord, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" unmistakably affirms the fact that God can give man up to judgment. It was there that the sinless Man bore the judgment of God upon sin, and it forever proclaims the true nature of sin—it is worthy of the penalty of spiritual and physical death--and God's hatred of it with His necessary condemnation of it.

Does God then care? The answer to this question also comes from the cross. It was God who gave the Son to offer the penal, propitiatory, substitutionary sacrifice, the remedy for sin and death. And, if that is not sufficient evidence of God's love and concern, reflect further upon the fact that it is also He who has revealed to men their lost condition and the significance of the atoning death, inscribed its interpretation in the written Word of God and preserved that Word for countless millions to read and ponder. Isaiah was right. Although righteous and necessary, judgment is His "strange work" and His "strange act."<sup>17</sup>

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Luthi, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>George Arthur Buttrick, *Christ and History* (New York and Nashville, 1963), pp. 22-23.

<sup>3</sup>Liithi, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. M.-J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul Epitre aux Romains* (4th ed.; Paris, 1930), p. 28. He remarks that the term's threefold occurrence is not climactic, but is a kind of refrain.

<sup>5</sup>Godet, I, 177-78.

<sup>6</sup>Murray, I, 44.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia, 1886), p. 40.

<sup>8</sup>Murray, I, 44-45.

<sup>9</sup>Cranfield, I, 125.

<sup>10</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1967 /reprint of 1879 ed. 7), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup>"Homosexuality," *Time*, October 24, 1969, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup>"The Homosexual: Newly Visible, Newly Understood," *Time*, October 31, 1969, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. I. E. Howard, "The Fever Chart of a Sick Society," *Christian Economics*, April 6, 1965, p. 4. Howard's brief article is very suggestive, and the writer is deeply indebted to it.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>The Hebrew words translated "strange" do not mean strange in the sense of contrary to God's goodness and grace, but simply unusual and extraordinary.