

CYCLE OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

By Steve Zeisler

Some of you have had the unfortunate experience sometime in your life of watching someone get blind drunk. You can picture the scene: perhaps a reserved, thoughtful young man finds himself getting more and more drunk at a party, and he becomes an entirely different person. He becomes careless and loud and pushy. Where once he treated women with a degree of reserve, he comes on as God's gift to women. His speech becomes slurred, he has food spilled all over himself, and drool dribbles out of the corner of his mouth. He is shouting now at the top of his lungs: He knows exactly what he's doing. Of course he can drive home if necessary. And why isn't everyone paying attention? The greater the stupidity, the louder he says it and the more certain he is that he is right.

Or you can imagine the same scene perhaps with a sophisticated, worldly, wise woman, someone who is in control of every environment she's in, who finds herself getting more and more drunk, falling over her high heels and out of her clothes, her makeup askew, more and more loudly demanding that people listen to the wisdom that she, in her own slurred speech, is declaring.

FOOLS CLAIMING WISDOM

These visual images may serve you as we come to Romans 1:18-32 this morning. Let's read verses 18-23:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

The problem Paul is elucidating for us is succinctly stated in verse 22: "Professing to be wise, they became fools." Perhaps that statement best characterizes our stumbling drunken friends if any statement would. The more they are blinded by drink, their ability to think ruined by alcohol, the more certain they are that they know what they are doing, the louder is their protestation that they understand exactly what is going on. They feel more delightful, wonderful, winsome, and authoritative than they have ever been. Proclaiming to be wise, insisting that they know exactly what they are doing, in that situation such a person more and more clearly evidences their foolishness.

Paul is talking about a world that is becoming blind and making choices as foolish as those of the people I described at the party, a world that has lost its moral compass. And the farther it gets from the truth, the less able it is to control itself, the more likely it is to stumble and fall. Yet, in the deepening darkness the voices of fools become more strident, "We're in control, follow us! We're throwing off the shackles of the past and leaving behind the religious failures of our youth. Now we're firmly set on a course that's wise and bright!" Claiming to be wise, they become fools.

Verse 18 is the beginning point for this discussion, and we find two themes and their relationship to each other here. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." The rebel race of human beings of which we're members has deliberately taken truth and rejected it, hidden it, denied it, and suppressed it. The response of God is wrath.

(The wrath of God is not like the Norse god Thor's throwing thunderbolts at the planet; it consists chiefly of letting us go and become who we will be without his intervening. But we'll come to that in a moment.)

Verses 18 through 23 primarily describe for us the process of suppressing the truth: What does it mean for people who ought to know better, who ought to be sober, to become more and more drunk, foolish and blind? But before we talk about suppressing the truth, verse 17 and this passage make very clear that the truth that is being suppressed is powerfully advanced by the world that God has made. It's not as if God is hiding the truth so that it is easily missed--available to a fortunate few. The truth of God is everywhere. He says in verse 17, "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith...." Every time you find a believing person whose action of faith yesterday has led to more faith today, they are displaying the righteousness of God. It is being made known in the life of someone you know.

Further, in verse 19, "that which is known about God is evident within them...." because God made it plain; he actively makes himself knowable in creation. Verse 20: "...since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen...." He has announced his invisible power and divine nature in the world that he has created, whether in the heavens or the vast beauties of earth, or in the incredible intricacy of cellular structures that we see under the microscope, or in whatever else we encounter in the created world. In all these things basic truth about God is being declared.

And yet the choice of the rebel race is to deny the truth. In verse 23 it says they exchanged the glory of God for an image. The term glory also indicates revelation - God displaying himself in a powerful and illuminating way. Glory is beautiful and aggressive; it is shouting its greatness. So in order to suppress the truth you have to work at it, and yet work at it we do as a race that does not want to bow before the God who has made us.

SUPPRESSING THE TRUTH

Suppressing truth about God is not becoming an atheist or even an agnostic. There are not many atheists in the world, and agnostics, perhaps a few more in number, are in a small minority as well. Most people who want nothing to do with God, will generally admit that he exists, but he exists as a sort of unformed benevolence, a higher power that is floating around someplace and perhaps can be summoned like a spiritual butler to bring you things when you need them. They can admit that God exists, but they will not pay attention to him. What Paul is saying here is that when anybody begins to suspect that the loving and righteous Person who created everything inhabits the same cosmos as they do, the proper response is for them to fall on their knees and thank him for their life and the world that they live in, and to look for some way to live for his honor. The minimum response is to have a sense of responsibility descend on them: They owe him something. They may not know what it is yet, but they had better start finding out. But mostly people suppress the truth by just leaving God at great distance, feeling no concern and certainly no sense of duty toward him.

How does suppression proceed? Verse 21: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." The word futile is sometimes translated vain. It's the same word used to translate the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." It has the idea of hollowness, a preening emptiness.

He says further that their foolish heart was darkened. The rebel race loses moral compass; it isn't able to make sound judgments anymore. And the darkness descends; the blind drunkenness becomes blinder. Perhaps you've seen drivers as dusk sets in or as a storm rises, who don't notice that it's getting darker. The thoughtful driver knows that with rain pelting down the streets are less safe and they can't see as easily, so they put the lights on, drive a little more slowly, and pay attention to the fact that it's getting dark. But every now and then some fool will go ripping by as if it isn't dark or dangerous at all, and-claiming to be wise and becoming fools-they have no idea how much darker the world is than just a few hours ago. So their foolish heart becomes darkened and they are not aware of it.

A DEEPER DESCENT

Verse 23 gives a description of a descent into sin: "...[they] exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." The

slope downward is apparent. Having the option at the beginning of worshipping God as he is-without limits, omnipotent, loving, merciful, glorious-they rejected it. Then the next choice was to worship humanity, and so the ancients would build idols that resembled human beings: strong, muscular figures. But that didn't last very long. The gods and forces they worshiped next resembled four-footed, domesticated animals: oxen and calves and so forth. These were followed by figures of reptiles, snakes, and other creatures that crawled on the ground. The attempt to build something in God's place that would meet their needs failed at every point, and they chose something worse. Thus the culture that is trying to suppress the truth gets darker.

Think of this century and the loss of faith as an influence in public life. There was once a time when people growing up in this country had heroes. If they weren't godly, at least they were heroic. When soldiers went to war they were courageously doing the right thing; GIs were heroic figures in World War II. Or cowboys as heroic figures saved damsels in distress. Even politicians and sports figures were bigger than life and worth emulating. Children could follow the examples set by parents and grandparents in making a marriage and establishing a home. Human beings in all these areas have become less worthy of emulation.

The descent described in Romans 1:23 can be seen in our culture. Today we don't worship animals, but we tend to worship impersonal forces and technology as a replacement for real human beings (who have replaced God) as the idols who will meet our needs. Many of our contemporaries think, "I'll harness the forces of nature and invent something that will change the world." Silicon Valley is famous world wide as a Mecca for those who believe this way. And the sad thing is that we're raising children in this country who are ill-equipped even for that technological world. We've lost the ability to teach and inspire them to learn even that much, and what they worship now is more likely to be guns than anything else. The descent from God to man to four-footed animals to snakes is very similar to the descent from God to man to technology to weapons - violent authority that is based on nothing more than terror and guns. The inner cities of our nation are raising kids who look up to amoral criminals. And we say, "How can this happen?" By exchanging the worship of God for the worship of something less than God.

ESTEEMED BY GOD

King David tells us how we ought to live. Psalm 8:3-9 is David's experience of thinking about the world he lived in three thousand years ago:

"When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

You made him rule over the works of your hands;
you put everything under his feet:
all flocks and herds,
and the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air,
and the fish of the sea,
and all that swim in the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

David is saying that when he looks at the heavens, he thinks of the majesty of the God who spans them, who owns the universe, who has made and who controls everything, who transcends human history. Thinking of the greatness of God, he is awestruck at his majesty, and it is from that God that human worth comes, "You

have made human beings just a bit lower than that which lives in eternal glory, a little bit lower than God." David, because he has a great God, has a great reason for valuing himself, and for teaching others about what life can be like.

Those who leave God behind also leave behind the potential for greatness in humanity. They have exchanged the glory of what is incorruptible for something that is corruptible, and it proceeds to corruption. The people in the world today who are influencing those who will be adults a generation from now are celebrities and media figures, not fathers or mothers or grandmothers or grandfathers, worthy individuals who live lives of accomplishment. Most celebrities are shameful and have very little to offer. So many look at public religious leaders and see crooks. They look at politicians and see liars. They look at sports and entertainment figures and see buffoons. Claiming to be wise, we're becoming fools. We're educating kids to know more about condoms than about how to live their lives. So Paul summarizes this as a suppression of the truth, and it's something we are sadly too familiar with.

The second theme in this passage is God's reaction to the suppression of the truth. It says that the wrath of God is revealed. He will act as we continue to suppress the truth. He talks about himself in his universe, and his light is shining in the hearts of people who know and love him. Everywhere he is discussing himself, appealing, and making himself known. And if the choice of the race that he has made to know and love him is to reject him, he will finally display his wrath from heaven; he will accept our choice.

GOD'S WRATH REVEALED

Three times, in verses 24, 26, and 28, Paul says what it means for God's wrath to be revealed. And again, we note, this is not an angry, petulant God stomping his foot and demanding, "Pay attention to me or else!" That isn't the picture. The wrath of God is described by the phrase, "He gave them over." Verse 24: "Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...." Verse 26: "For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions...." Verse 28: "And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind...." He stops deflecting the consequences. His intervention keeps the consequences from being as bad as they might have been. But eventually he says, "Okay, you get what you want." And he gives them over to the inevitable results of the choices they are making.

Now in verses 24 through 32 we find two ideas which summarize the consequences that occur when God removes restraints. One of these we will talk about this week and the other next week. Look at verse 24:

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.

A discussion of 'bodily honor' (sexual lostness) is too important to treat briefly in the time remaining today. If there is a cutting edge to the church's interaction with the world we live in, this is probably it. So next week we will consider the issues raised in verses 24-27.

But now let's turn to the second idea, in verse 28:

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind....

That's the second big problem: depraved minds that are no longer useful for thinking moral thoughts with, that won't serve people in finding out how to live.

...to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, malice [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, 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.

A LOST MIND

It doesn't take great insight to read this list, observe the world we live in, and see a high degree of correlation. Consider the terror of the camps in Bosnia in which Muslim women have been imprisoned and raped deliberately in order to shame and impregnate them; the sheer venting of terror on people who can't defend themselves because it's there to be done; the starvation by the warlords in Somalia of their people and the brutalization of those who are too weak to do anything about it; gang violence among youth of this country in the suburbs as well as the cities; the unmitigated arrogance of the wealthy and the powerful in the boardrooms of companies who love nothing but money who will destroy competitors just because it's there to be done. The world we live in is becoming depraved in its thinking, and likes being that way.

Paul draws an awful conclusion in verse 32: "...although they know the ordinance of God, 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." Initially they required suppression of the truth about God; in order to serve themselves they had to lie, run from the truth about God, deny his existence. Now they have come full circle, and they are perfectly willing to acknowledge God and everything he stands for; and what he stands for is everything they are not, and they deserve to die for what they are doing, but they don't care. They know the ordinance of God, they choose with a stiff neck and a raised fist to disobey him, and they enjoy recruiting anyone who will listen to join them in their defiance of God. The depraved mind, being unable to reason morally, having no light with which to guide itself anymore, comes to a rebellion against God that is overt and that would like nothing more than to invite someone else to join in its darkness.

To understand this descent into hell is important, but remember the theme of the book of Romans that we began with last week in chapter 1 verse 16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation." We're going to continue for the next three weeks to look clearly at why the problems are as grievous as they are in order to be sure that the answers are going to make sense to us. The painful announcements must make us feel pain. The darkness has to be seen to be really dark in order for the light to do its work. But clearly the light does its work: "[The gospel] is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes."

THE WICKED AND THE LOST

I was struck by a couple of stories in the news this week. One is the story of Westley Dodd, a man who was executed in the state of Washington, hung at his own request because he had hung in a brutal fashion one of the victims he had murdered; and he thought it was fitting that he should die the same way. He was a rapist and grisly murderer of children. He was interviewed after having been sentenced to death, and he said, "I'd better die because if you let me out I'll do it again." He meant that he got a thrill from raping and murdering children. There was a vile quality to Westley Dodd's life that would be hard to outdo. He invited outrage, in effect laughing at death: "Yes, I know the things that I do deserve condemnation, and yet if you were to let me out, I'd do them again."

In the very last days of his life, someone, I've read, gave him a Bible or tract or spoke to him in person (I'm not sure of the details), and this powerful gospel of God for salvation was made plain to him. And one of the last things he said was, "I've never known peace in my whole life, but now through my faith in Jesus Christ I know peace with God for the first time, and I'm looking forward to spending eternity with Christ." Most of us will respond to Dodd's eleventh hour conversion with a degree of outrage: He absolutely does not deserve this! He is a despicable, evil, vile man. And I'm a little embarrassed, frankly, to be associated with a gospel that applies to people like that at the end of their life.

But the outrageousness of it is exactly the point. The vilest person you can think of, who genuinely believes that Jesus loved and died for them and replaced their wicked and evil heart with a beautiful heart of Christ, receives life in him. And the marvel of that, of course, is that the vilest thing that we ourselves have ever done, the most wicked thing of which we're guilty, the awful hidden crimes that are ours and that no one else knows anything about, are forgiven, too. The gospel borders on scandal precisely because it is powerful enough to

give new life to someone like Westley Dodd.

The second story that struck me is the story of James and Jennifer Stolpa, who made news this week as well. If you set out on purpose to get more lost than they did anywhere in the contiguous forty-eight states of this country, you couldn't do it. Northwest Nevada is as far from civilization as it is possible to get in this country. And they did so in the most extreme conditions of a terrible winter storm. In desperation they prayed for help, and God answered their prayers, strengthening the young man to walk forty-eight hours in chest-deep snow across fifty miles of barren wilderness. At the end of his strength, one person saw him waving, and he was able to retain enough of his mind to articulate where his wife and baby were. They went back and saved them, and the child was the least harmed of the three. The point, it seems to me, is that you cannot get so lost that God can't respond to your prayers and find you. If this family wasn't too lost for him to hear their prayers, nobody can get too lost! In the most extreme need-confusion, uncertainty, not knowing how life got to be the way it is, feeling the vertigo of falling and having no idea which way to even fling out your hand for help-prayers to the Lord God for help are answered because the gospel is that powerful.

If someone as evil as Westley Dodd is acceptable because of the blood of Jesus Christ, and if someone as lost as Jennifer and James Stolpa can find help by praying to the God of the universe, then even though we have to confront a world that is destroying itself, we do so with enormous hope and a message that is life-giving. The suppression of the truth of the glory of God continues unabated in our culture. If this culture is not worshiping snakes or that which is deeply and awfully subhuman now, it is very close to it. Yet we pray to a God who answers prayers, who forgives the despicable, who answers the cry of the lost one. And we say again, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes."

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Steve Zeisler
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