

## **The Consequences of Unbelief** **Romans 1:24-32**

Last time we saw the progression, we might better say regression, of man as he turned his back on God and began to worship himself. The many revelations of God throughout human history, and the truths of Scripture today, have been willingly ignored and discounted. Instead, man has taken it upon himself to make the rules, to define for himself and according to his own reasoning, such things as truth, morality, and right and wrong. And we know that such a decision cannot be made without suffering the consequences.

But we also all know, both from Scripture and from our own life experiences, that God is, thankfully, longsuffering. He does not punish our every sin immediately. We do not experience the consequences of our foolish and wicked behavior as soon as we commit it. God is patient, both with individuals and with peoples. As Scripture reminds us, “the Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

However, Scripture also teaches us that God’s patience is not without end. Eventually He will punish, as He must, human sin. For believers that punishment has already been exacted at the cross. For unbelievers, it will come in eternity. But the consequences of sin are not eternal only. Even during this life, the harmful effects of sin are evident. That is to say, there are more negative ramifications of sin than only those meted out in eternity. Here, in this world, we also must face the results of our foolish and wicked choices. Now, for the believer, the result of sin is usually (hopefully) a broken spirit, a contrite heart, and a commitment to being filled with the Holy Spirit and walking according to God’s commandments. As David prayed after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and his orchestrating the death of her husband,

“<sup>4</sup>Against You, You only, I have sinned

And done what is evil in Your sight,

So that You are justified when You speak

And blameless when You judge. . . .

<sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, God,

And renew a steadfast spirit within me. . . .

<sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,

And sustain me with a willing spirit” (Psalm 51:4, 10, 12).

For unbelievers, however, it is different. Those that have rejected the truth of God’s word and what it teaches about Him and His expectations, are not broken over their sin. In fact, they do not even recognize what they do, say, or think as sin at all. That is because, as we saw last time, they justify their own behavior by the standards they have established. But Scripture is clear. They should “not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a person sows, this he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7).

These truths made sense to those believers in the church at Rome who had converted out of Judaism. They knew, probably all too well, the history of their people and the consequences of Israel’s rejection of God. The history of Israel was replete with examples of the people turning from their God and worshipping false gods.

The psalmist Asaph offered what might be seen as a summary of Israel's troubled history,

“<sup>11</sup>But My people did not listen to My voice,  
And Israel did not obey Me.  
<sup>12</sup>So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart,  
To walk by their own plans” (Psalm 84:11-12).

At times, God allowed His people to face the consequences of their choices. For example, when the Philistines and Ammonites troubled Israel during the time of the Judges, and the people turned to the local gods of Baal and Ashtaroath for protection, God responded by giving them over to the consequences of their foolish and wicked decision.

“<sup>11</sup>And the Lord said to the sons of Israel, ‘did I not save you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the sons of Ammon, and the Philistines? <sup>12</sup>And when the Sidonians, the Amalekites, and the Maonites oppressed you, you cried out to Me, and I saved you from their hands. <sup>13</sup>Yet you abandoned Me and served other gods; therefore I will no longer save you. <sup>14</sup>Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress” (Judges 10:11-14).

Later, God sent His prophets, but they were rejected in turn. One example of many is when the young king, Joash, listened to his foolish counselors, and abandoned the worship of God for the pagan gods of the local peoples.

“Then the Spirit of God covered Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the priest like clothing; and he stood above the people and said to them, ‘this is what God has said, “why do you break the commandments of the Lord and do not prosper? Because you have abandoned the Lord, He has also abandoned you”” (2 Chronicles 24:20).

In response to this warning, Joash had the prophet murdered (2 Chronicles 24:22).

Such are the ways of those who reject God. As they continue in their denial of God and His truths, they move farther and farther from His path of righteousness and sink deeper and deeper into a life of wickedness. Here, in this passage, Paul is trying to help those believers in Rome understand that there comes a point at which God will abandon those who reject Him to the consequences of their own sin.

### **The Consequences of Unbelief**

Paul had explained that God had chosen to clearly reveal Who He was, to all humankind, from the beginning of Creation. Nevertheless, man had chosen to reject God, and thinking he knew better, fashioned his own gods from “birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures” (Romans 1:23). Because of this, Paul wrote, “<sup>24</sup>God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. <sup>25</sup>For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (v. 24-25).

God “gave them over” (v. 24). This terrifying reality is stated here and affirmed again later (v. 26). The word, *paradidōmi*, is a verb that implies intensity. One example from Scripture is that it is used to describe the body being burned (1 Corinthians 13:30). It is also used three times to refer to Christ's death on the cross (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2, 25). And it is the same verb used to describe God's

punishment of the rebellious angels (2 Peter 2:4). Clearly, when God gives you over, it is not a pleasant thing.

We can understand this giving over by God in two ways. In one sense, God gives sinful man over to his sin when He withdraws His restraining hand. We talked last time about the fact that one of the beneficial aspects of God's common grace is that He restrains sin. That is, God does not allow as much sin to occur as He could, and He does not allow the consequences of that sin to manifest themselves to its fullest extent.

In this case, however, God allows sin to take its course and the consequences of that sin to be meted out directly. Interestingly, we know that though sinful man does not often recognize it as such, even this, too, is a blessing from God. Unregenerate man generally only feels sorrow for his sin when he feels its consequences personally. By allowing sinful man to receive the full consequences of his sinful acts, God is providing him with an opportunity to recognize his fallen nature and turn to Him in repentance.

Thankfully, this abandonment by God is not necessarily eternal. Until a man dies, he has the opportunity to receive Christ and enjoy the forgiveness of his sins. The Scriptures abound with examples of hardened, sinful people who find God's grace when it seems they are beyond all hope. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well or the criminal crucified alongside Jesus. They were met by God's grace and, like us, could thankfully agree with Paul that "such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11).

A second, and more direct, sense in which God gives man over to his sin is in His immediate judgment. Again we can look at examples from Scripture. From our study of Genesis, the Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah come to mind. The ruin of Pharaoh during the time of Moses is another example. Sometimes God punishes man for his sin immediately. God is not required to delay judgment. He did not give the rebellious angels who allied with Satan a second chance, and He is under no obligation to give sinful man the time or opportunity to mend his ways. God is omniscient, and He knows that unpunished sin often leads simply to more sin. But even these judgments are an act of His mercy and grace. As God's prophet later explained, "the Lord will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the Lord, and He will respond to their pleas and heal them" (Isaiah 19:22).

God gives sinful man over "in the lusts of their hearts to impurity" (v. 24). Sin begins in the heart. Sin is always inward before it is outward. As Christ tried to teach His frequently confused disciples, "<sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, acts of adultery, other immoral sexual acts, thefts, false testimonies, and slanderous statements. <sup>20</sup>These are the things that defile the person; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the person" (Matthew 15:19-20). Sin begins within. And man has a troubled, fallen spirit within him.

"The heart is more deceitful than all else  
And is desperately sick;  
Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

At the time of Paul, the heart was not seen as an organ that pumped blood only, but as the very center of a person. It was the locus of his passions, thoughts, and feelings. It was the root of man's will and the source of his actions. In his arrogance and selfishness, sinful man through his impure heart has indulged his own desires and consulted nothing but his own needs at the moment. Satan might tempt, but it is the decision of man to put his will before God's that is the essence of sin. Beginning in the Garden, man has sought to think of himself first, and that perspective has invariably proven destructive.

God gave man over to his 'lusts' (*epithumia*), a word that refers not to sexual temptation only, but rather to any forbidden desire. James echoed this truth when he wrote, "<sup>14</sup>each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. <sup>15</sup>Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it has run its course, brings forth death" (James 1:14-15). But in this case, Paul does seem to be thinking specifically about sexual sin. This is similar to his encouragement to other churches who endured the same struggles. For example, Paul reminded those in the church in Ephesus, "among them we too all previously lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the rest" (Ephesians 2:3).

These lusts led to impurity, *akatharsia*, a word that means to be unclean. It is most often used with reference to the decaying flesh in a grave. This graphic term was well understood by the Jews in the congregation at Rome, since they had understood from their youth that ceremonial uncleanness was brought about by contact with a dead body.

"<sup>11</sup>The one who touches the dead body of any person will also be unclean for seven days. <sup>12</sup>That one shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and then he will be clean; but if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean. <sup>13</sup>Anyone who touches a dead body, the body of a person who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from Israel" (Leviticus 19:11-13).

But under the Law of grace, rather than the ceremonial Law of the Old Testament, Paul's point was that if a person did not repent of their sexual sin, they were to be cut off from the body. As Paul wrote to other churches on what must have been a topic as common in their day as in our own,

"<sup>1</sup>It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, namely, that someone has his father's wife. . . . <sup>3</sup>For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. <sup>4</sup>In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup>I have decided to turn such a person over to Satan for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5:1, 3-5).

"But sexual immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints" (Ephesians 5:3).

Those involved in unrepentant sexual sin are to be renounced by the local church body.

The natural consequence of this sin was that “that their bodies might be dishonored among them” (v. 24). When man thought to indulge his body, instead he dishonored it. This is not a topic I will need to dwell on for a very long time to convince you of its truth. Man began in Eden. There, Scripture records, “<sup>18</sup>Then the Lord God said, ‘it is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him’. . . . <sup>21</sup>So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. <sup>22</sup>And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. . . . <sup>24</sup>For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked, but they were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:18, 21-22, 24-25).

Man began with a perfect sexual practice. God, personally, made a wife for Adam who would suit his needs ideally. Each party understood their relationship to the other, and each understood their purpose. Both appreciated the permanency of their union, and both indulged in physical pleasure without either shame or regret. For a brief time, it was the only perfect marriage that has ever been.

We need not look far today to see how much this has changed. Divorce, once stigmatized and considered socially unacceptable, is, today, nearly more common than a lifetime of wedlock. The old joke, “marriage is a fine institution, but who wants to live in an institution” has become a reality. The most recent statistics (Pew Research Center, 2021) indicate that 46.3% of marriages end in divorce. Odds do not improve for those who marry again. More than 60% of second marriages end in divorce and, for those who truly push their luck, more than 73% of third marriages end in divorce. Currently, the average length of a marriage in the United States today is 8 years 2 months. “Until death do us part” indeed.

But there are more significant signs of the deterioration of humanity in the area of sexuality. Another recent Pew Research Center Survey, this one conducted in 2019, found that 57% of people who claim to be Christians agreed that casual sex before a couple gets married is acceptable. Perhaps more surprisingly is that 50% of people who claim to be Christians stated that a carnal relationship between people who do not plan to get married is also acceptable. Yet another example is pornography. Previously hidden in the dark allies of American culture, it is now mainstream on the internet. Finally, homosexuality, once taboo, is now not only “out of the closet” but taught as an acceptable lifestyle in public school Health classes. This has been the descent of human sexual practices since the Fall and serves to emphasize what happens when God “gives over” a person to their own sinful desires.

As we learned last time, and as is again given here as the cause of this destruction, man has “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (v. 25). Paul, here, is simply restating what he has previously emphasized, that man, “<sup>22</sup>claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup>and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures” (Romans 1:22-23). Having been presented with the revelation of God, man chose to reject Him, and instead endeavored to create for himself other gods. When that superstition proved inadequate, man then turned to himself and made himself the god. As a result, man has moved further away from the One true God through the centuries, until he was where he was in Paul’s day, and today in ours, even farther from the truth.

## **The Manifestation of Unbelief**

Having made his case, Paul then spends some time listing the various other sins resulting from continued unbelief and the rejection of God. Let us say at the outset, that there is no reason to think this an exhaustive list, but rather we might look at it as those sins that were most manifest in Paul's day as he traveled around the Roman empire.

“<sup>26</sup>For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, <sup>27</sup>and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. <sup>28</sup>And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things that are not proper, <sup>29</sup>being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup>without understanding, untrustworthy, unfeeling, unmerciful” (v. 26-31).

The first specific “degrading passion” (v. 26) Paul elaborates on is that of homosexuality. This is not the worst sin imaginable, but as we have seen, it is an example of man making himself a god. In homosexuality, man inverts the created order of things and chooses unnatural sexual pleasures instead of enjoying those created by God. Homosexuality has always been wrong. The example of the men of Sodom comes immediately to mind. Recall that they were so perverse, and so intense in their perversity, that they had to be made blind by the angels before they would cease to insist upon fulfilling their wicked desires.

Unfortunately, in our modern culture, many Christian churches have chosen to allow homosexuality to be an acceptable life choice for believers. A recent Pew Research Center poll (2019) indicated that 54% of all people who considered themselves Christians believe homosexuality is acceptable. However, the laws of God and the truths of Scripture are not up for a popular vote. What God has declared to be sin, man cannot declare to be permissible without great personal cost and eternal consequences. God promises that those who continue unrepentant in a homosexual lifestyle will receive “in their own persons the due penalty of their error” (v. 27).

A second general category Paul refers to is that of having a “depraved mind” (v. 28). The word Paul uses, *adokimos*, is a word that refers to metals which are unable to be worked with because of their impurities. Literally, it means to not stand the test. Scripture informs us that a depraved mind cannot know God, “a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). In fact, if a person does not possess a proper understanding of Who God is, they can know nothing truly moral or ethical because,

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

Those with a depraved mind cry out to God,

“<sup>14</sup>Go away from us!

We do not even desire the knowledge of Your ways.

<sup>15</sup>Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him” (Job 21:14-15).

Quite literally, what Paul is saying here is that the mind that rejects God will, in turn, be rejected by Him. And this giving over to a depraved mind leads people “to do those things that are not proper” (v. 28).

These things include, but are not limited to, the several things Paul goes on to list,

“<sup>29</sup>unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup>without understanding, untrustworthy, unfeeling, unmerciful” (v. 29-31).

Unrighteousness and wickedness serve as a comprehensive and general summary of all sin. The others that follow are largely self-explanatory, and sadly, quite self-evident. Our world is full of those who choose greed over generosity, those who measure their success by their bank account. They take pride in themselves and in their accomplishments, as though they had no idea that all things are gifts from God. People work diligently to find ways around the truth and work harder to do the wrong thing than the right thing. We murder approximately 3,000 unborn children each day in the United States. Respect for authority is seen as the ways of the “boomers” - an old-fashioned notion that died out with black and white televisions. Because people have disregarded God’s truth they cannot be trusted, as any loophole will do to escape keeping a commitment. People are calloused and uncaring about those who are different, who have less, or are simply not worth the trouble because they can give nothing in return. Such are the ways of our age where man has chosen to make himself a god.

And we must remember, as we said last time, that these qualities are not only condemned in Scripture, but also in the hearts of men by the God Who created them. In no society that I am aware of, are these characteristics seen as virtues. Humanity possesses a basic standard of right and wrong whether or not it chooses to acknowledge it.

### **The Calloused Heart**

Having outlined the sins themselves, at last Paul turns to what may be the most damning result of rejecting God. Those who practiced such wicked acts as Paul as just described, were so far lost that they had no sense of shame or brokenness over their actions. Indeed, not only did they do these things, but even went so far as to encourage others to do them as well. As Paul concluded this section he wrote, “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” (v. 32).

This is the lowest point in the trajectory of fallen man. It is one thing to justify our own sin, but to encourage wickedness in others is beneath contempt and worthy of the most severe demonstration of God’s wrath and judgment. In any society, there are those who do wrong. People who commit crimes, or engage in behaviors that are seen as evil. But the worst are those who approve and endorse such behaviors.

Again, we need not look too far into our own culture to see this. Accountability is a word more often used in the context of weight-loss programs than ethical behavior. Modern culture revels in its sin. It glorifies its corruption and condemns those who speak out against it. For example, should a person try to argue that sexuality should be reserved for a married man and woman, they are seen as positively medieval. The ways of God and the truths of Scripture have become alien to so many millions in this fallen world.

### **Takeaways**

There can be no more terrifying experience than to be abandoned by God. To be “given over” by God - to be permitted the freedom to destroy yourself, is a prospect to be avoided at all costs. Yet, so many welcome it, not believing in the eternal, and even immediate, consequences of their decision. But there is hope. Hope for us that have been given the gift of faith and the desire to resist the sinful temptations of this world. We must be diligent to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that we might not lose our way and fall into the alluring trap of making ourselves a god.

We have hope also in that God still delays final judgment. There is still time for those who are lost to be found. And this understanding ought to create a sense of urgency in each of us who are believers. As Paul writes later in this same letter, “how then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). Let us pray for the courage to speak out and the wisdom to do so with grace and kindness, and not a sense of judgment.