

ROMANS

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED

ABANDONED BY GOD

Text: Romans 1:24-32

Main preaching point: God is active, not arbitrary, in His wrath.

INTRODUCTION:

God restrains the mighty oceans of the earth by miles of coastlines and mountain cliffs; if He did not, every continent on the globe would drown under the massive depths of the oceans' waves. But what would happen if God removed the restraints from the human heart? What if He released the invisible cords or removed the guardrails and released man to do what his fallen and corrupt nature desired to do? And more than that, what if God shoved a deliberately willful and continuously rejecting man down a slippery slope into darkness? What if He strapped a bowling ball around the neck of an already drowning man? What we are trying to imagine in our mind's eye is *the abandonment of God* found in this text. There is nothing more *serious, solemn, and terrifying* than to be abandoned by God.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul proceeds to draw out *the consequences of the world's refusal to worship God as He is*. He draws a horrifying picture of a variety of vices. Contemporary records show he is not exaggerating. All he says can be documented from the world of his day. Study ancient Rome and its decadence, and you will see that Paul is not attempting to paint the entire picture. He is pursuing a theological purpose of showing that all people are sinners, under the wrath of God, and in need of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we have already seen, the argument of this entire section shows that the rejection of divine light must necessarily incur God's wrath. Jesus said in John 3:19-20,

- **John 3:19-20**—"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil."

Before we get to the bottom of these verses, let me give you the bottom line: *people cannot reject God and go scatheless*. Five simple headings form the outline for this weighty section. Paul begins with...

EXPOSITION:

A. THE CONNECTION (v.24a)

Immediately, we see the connection with the word **"Therefore."** You've heard it said in Bible interpretation that when you see the word *"therefore,"* you must see what the *therefore* is *there for*. It is one of the most important words in the Bible and very easy to pass over. It is like a bridge that connects two islands of thought and brings them together. It points back to what was previously said and then brings us forward to what is now being said. Therefore—based on what Paul just said about man's intentional, deliberate, continual rejection of the knowledge of God—certain consequences will be experienced.

The connection that Paul is making is that the most dangerous sin anyone can ever commit is the rejection of the knowledge of God. Paul has already explained in verses 18-21 that *God has revealed Himself to every single person on planet earth who has ever lived through general revelation*. You know that there is a God and that He is awesome, He is the Creator and Sustainer, and He has Creator rights over you. And to reject this knowledge is intellectual dishonesty. David said, *"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps.14:1)*.

And not only has man *rejected the knowledge of God*, but he has exchanged this knowledge of God for the worship of idols (*Rom.1:23*). He has exchanged the truth for a lie, light for darkness, diamonds for dirt. And remember, *idolatry is anything that occupies a place that is due only to God in our lives. An idol is anything you love more than God, fear more than God, and serve more than God*.

So, as we come to verse 24, we see the connection. And let me underscore or highlight this truth once again: to reject the knowledge of God is to depart from God. You are like a boat tied up at the dock on the ocean, and the powerful ocean currents start pulling you out to sea. God didn't unloose the rope; you did by rejecting the knowledge of Him—and now you are adrift mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically into the unrelenting seas of judgment. Is this where you want to be? You don't have to be, for this is why God has you here today or listening to this message right now.

We move from the connection to...

B. THE CONDEMNATION (v.24b)

Here is it, **"Therefore God gave them over..."** stop right there. This is a divine judgment. The verb **"gave them over"** shows that God is active and not passive in the process. This same verb is used for what occurred when Christ went to the cross: **Romans 4:25**—*"He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification."* Jesus was delivered over, handed over like a criminal, to stand in the place of judgment for us. It was not Pilate who did it for fear or Judas for money, but it was God the Father Himself who gave over His Son.

We find this term again in reference to Christ in **Romans 8:32**—*"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"* God spared Abram's son Isaac, but He did not spare His own.

Foreordained from eternity past, God delivered up, gave over, His Son in the most extraordinary judgment for the salvation of sinners. Coming under the full fury of God's wrath upon the cross, Jesus died in our place. This is the exact same verb. God gave men over...why? Because men reject the knowledge of God. It is not only a dangerous thing to *reject* the knowledge of God, but it is also a dangerous thing to *have* the knowledge of God because we are held accountable for the knowledge that God has given to us.

We learn here that God is not just letting go of the rope and letting the current pull people out to sea. This is after man has let go of the rope by rejection. God now shoves the boat of your life out into the dark seas of judgment. This is not passive but active. It is not arbitrary, random, or erratic. This is God's deliberate wrath.

This does not mean that God is *vindictive* or *unmerciful*. What Paul is seeking to reveal to us about God is that He is not passive but active and purposeful in His condemnation.

Now why does He do this?

1. **To show His immutable holiness**—God’s nature does not change from year to year, century to century, or place to place, nor does His character vacillate with times or seasons. In fact, there are similar phrases throughout the Scripture.
 - **Genesis 6:3**—“My Spirit shall not strive with man forever....”
 - **Psalms 81:12**—“So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, To walk in their own devices.”
 - **Hosea 4:17**—Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone.
 - **Acts 7:42**—But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven;
 - **Acts 14:16**—In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways;
 - **2 Thessalonians 2:11-12**—For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, ¹² in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

Who’s doing this? God. God sends it so that they are judged. Why? Because they did not believe the truth. When they had it, they rejected it. There comes a time when a person has been running stop signs for so long with God—whether it is an individual, a church, a denomination, a city, a state, or a nation—and God says, “Fine...enough....” And He will give them a shove toward lies and error and turn them over in judgment. Whatever we believe about God, this must be incorporated into our thinking.

2. **To show His active judgment on sin**—So that we understand this was not a slip of the tongue or a misstatement, Paul repeats it three times in the space of these verses, and it is like a hammer driving the nail into the board of our minds.
 - **Verse 24**—Therefore God gave them over in the lust of their hearts to impurity...
 - **Verse 26**—For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions...
 - **Verse 28**—...God gave them over to a deprave mind...

God *withdraws* His hand—and this is not a case of simply departure, but the force of the withdrawal is to punish the evil they themselves have committed. Come up close and listen, dear friends: *Reject the truth, and you will embrace the darkness.* There is no neutral spot or middle ground.

- *Why are you doing with the truth of God?*
- *How are you responding to the knowledge of God given in creation, in conscience, and in Christ?*
- *Are you neglecting what you know to do what you want?*
- *Are you rejecting the light given?*

On a very human level, we can all understand, as children or parents, how hearing is one thing and listening or responding is another. I can recall my mother calling me from the backdoor of my grandmother’s house in the housing projects of Matthew Henson.

There was a large dirt field where my buddies and I were playing flag football, and I could hear my mother calling me as clear as day. But I wanted to keep on playing, so I ignored her and kept doing my thing. My friends would say, "Marv, yo mamma is calling you," and I would say, "Yea, I know...but keep on playing."

Then 10 minutes later, my brother would come over to the field and say, "Marvin, you better get home, boy, or you are going to get your _____ spanked." My friends would all laugh, and I would say, "I'm good, I'm good, throw me the ball, man!" Then, suddenly, my friends would stop playing and gravitate away from me...and there my mother was! She didn't scream or cuss at me; she would just grab me by the ear and pull me toward the house, gritting her teeth and saying in a tone that only I could hear, "I know you heard me calling you...do you think I am playing with you, boy?"

What does God give men up to? He gives man up to moral impurity.

- ¹Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,

This word for "**lust**" (*epithymia*) is a very strong word, and it means strong cravings for that which is forbidden—inordinate, self-indulgent, evil cravings that displace proper affections for God. These are vile passions that are pent up in the heart. This is the water slide with weights on your back, spiraling from rejection of God to thanklessness to shamelessness. This "*impurity*" is the result of rejecting God. It speaks of all sorts of foul immorality. Filth. Sexual deviancy. This is a lower, bottom-of-the-barrel type of immorality. It is used in a couple of other places. Here are two cross references.

- **1 Thessalonians 4:7**—For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.
- **Galatian 5:19**—Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality,

John R.W. Stott reminds us, "The history of the world confirms that idolatry tends to immorality. A false image of God leads to a false understanding of sex."¹ Not all sin is the same, and this slippery slope is cascading down—so that when you reject the knowledge of God, you are now set on a course downward to lower unclean moral filth. And applied to a nation, whenever a country rejects the knowledge of God, it becomes a cesspool of filth, like a garbage truck headed downhill with no brakes and picking up speed. The next statement presents further clarification.

so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

In **1 Corinthians 6:18**, Paul tells us that sexual sin is a unique sin. It's not like other sins.

- Flee immorality. Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

It lays a stamp on you in a particular way—like a burn mark or a scare. This is why **Proverbs 6:27-28** says,

- ²⁷ Can a man take fire in his bosom
And his clothes not be burned?
²⁸ Or can a man walk on hot coals
And his feet not be scorched?

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 76.

Sexual sin is playing with fire. And when one plays with fire, they get burned. It's like playing with 20 rattlesnakes in the shower. Notice carefully, **“so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.”** Shameful behavior. People cannot reject God and go scatheless, and people cannot give themselves to immorality and go scatheless. Consequences follow.

Paul moves now from the connection to the condemnation to...

C. THE CLARIFICATION (v.25)

²⁵ 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

Paul explains how it is that they ended up with God being against them. **“For they exchanged the truth of God”**—in other words, they had the truth of God and decided to throw it aside. And as we said before, *to reject the truth is to embrace the lie*. “For a lie” can be properly translated as “for the lie,” meaning when you reject the knowledge of God and exchange the worship of God, you fall for the ultimate lie.

To reject the knowledge of God is to step into the darkness. How did a person get to this place? They refused to properly respond to the light of who God is, and they began to “worship the creature rather than the Creator,” whether that be their own body or something in this world. Remember, an idol is anything we *love* more than God, *fear* more than God, and *serve* more than God. So, this could be a job, a child, a spouse, a hobby, a bank account, or whatever you are more preoccupied with than God. What you worship, you serve. They are always packaged together. If you tell me what you worship, I will tell you what you serve.

Paul adds the end of verse 25, **“who is blessed forever. Amen.”** Paul cannot mention the name of God without giving God praise. Amen is what you usually hear from a congregation when they are saying “yes” to the truth which the preacher declares, but no one is heard except Paul—so this is Paul’s doxology. The mere mention of the blessed Creator erupts praise from Paul’s soul. It comes bursting out of his heart. God is *“blessed forever,”* Paul says, *“Amen,”* which means “yes, it is so. Yes, it is true.” He cannot wait for the end. He wants to speak well of God because he is thinking rightly of God. So, right in the middle of this dark section, Paul praises God, and what he shows us *is that there is no time that is not appropriate to give praise to God*.

D. THE CONTINUATION (vv.26-27)

The first three words, **“for this reason,”** tell us that Paul is not finished. His thought continues, but mark again the phrase, **“God gave them over.”** This time, the darkness gets darker. The cavern gets wider. First, there is a giving over to *moral impurity*, but now it goes deeper into the abyss—**“to degrading passions.”** Degrading means *shameful, depraved, vile, dishonorable, corrupting, disgraceful, and base*.

How does this degrading passion look?

for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,

The **“natural function”** of the woman is to marry a man and have an intimate, noble sexual relationship with her own husband and produce children. This is the way God designed it. Sexual intercourse was intended for a husband and his wife, and for no one else!

But they are given over to that which is **“unnatural,”** meaning *bizarre*, against nature. This activity does not *lead* to the judgment of God; *it is* the judgment of God. All virtue is lost. But this sin and judgment were not confined to women. Males engaged in the equivalent evil.

- ²⁷ 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.

Paul’s word for **“abandoned”** is a rather strong one. First, God gives up man because of rejection, and now *“the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another.”* It’s like logs being tossed into the fire, and the intensity is rising. Men were burning up with a powerful but unnatural passion. It becomes a rage. **“Men with men committing indecent acts”**—Indecent means acts that shame oneself. **“Receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error”**—Paul is not thinking of a disease like AIDS or some other sexual disease, but the penalty or requital necessary according to God’s law is eternal separation from God in hell.

- **1 Corinthians 6:9-11**—Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ 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.

The only hope for a sinner given over to ever be rescued is if God intervenes by His Spirit, through the message of the Gospel, granting conviction of sin, the gift of repentance and faith in Christ, resulting in a washing from sin, a setting apart from the world and darkness, and being acquitted in the courts of heaven on the merits of the sinless life and substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of Christ.

What Paul is saying in verses 26-27 is there is a burning of desire in this world that will lead to a burning of the soul and body in hell.

E. THE CORRESPONDENCE (vv.28-32)

Paul wants to show that the cases are parallel; *as they deserted God, so God abandoned them*. This is not just about homosexuals and lesbians but applies to every sinner who rejects the knowledge of God.

- ²⁸ And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer,

Who is the “they?” Who is this speaking of? Go back to verses 25, 21, and 19—*“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie...” “even though they knew God...” “God made it evident to them.”*

It would be a grave interpretive mistake to place all that is taking place here on God’s judgment on sexual perversion. This starts with men and women, responsible free moral agents, deliberately and continually rejecting the knowledge of God given in the things He has made. Let me say it again, *it is a dangerous thing to reject the knowledge of God*, but it is also a dangerous thing to *have* the knowledge of God because we are now all accountable for it.

To **“not see fit to acknowledge God any longer”** means not merely that they refused to have God in their knowledge, *but they thrust Him out of their circle of acquaintance*. Their ignorance of God was not due to a *lack of opportunity* to know Him, but to their deliberate refusal. If you reject God, it sends you into a tailspin, a death spiral, if you will—mentally, morally, emotionally, and spiritually.

So let no one say it was in my *genes* or because my parents didn't love or nurture me. Paul is saying that the one reason man stands condemned under the judgment of God is *he or she rejects the knowledge of God deliberately and continually*. You prefer other things to the knowledge of God. And so, the final "giving over" is seen.

- God gave them over to a depraved mind to do those things which are not proper,

This is the third time the phrase "God gave them over..." and the death spiral goes deeper. **A depraved mind** is a mind rendered incapable of rational thought. The mind is no longer fit for the purpose for which it was intentionally made. In the Greek, it originally meant "that which has not stood the test." It was used of coins that were substandard. The choice of words is Paul's shorthand way of saying they did not approve to know God and they came to have an unapproved mind—a mind unable to make trustworthy moral judgments. Unfit. Now Paul launches into a detailed list of the sins he has in mind. There are other lists in Scripture (*Matt.15:19-20; Gal.5:19-21; Eph.4:17-19; Col.3:5*), but this is the motherload. 21 vices are listed. The exclusion of God left room for nothing else.

- **Being filled with all unrighteousness**—do not think this is a half-heartedness about sin, but rather, it is being given over to it, filled up with it. They depart completely from the standard of God in attitude and action.
- **Wickedness**—the perverting of virtue and moral principles from their purpose to evil ends
- **Greed**—the excessive and immoderate desire for more and more wealth. Total lack of contentment
- **Evil**—a desire to injure others in order to fulfill your greed
- **Full of envy**—spite and resentment or jealousy toward the success or possession of another
- **Murder**—the unlawful killing of another human being
- **Strife**—bitter conflict, quarreling, heated, and often violent dissension
- **Deceit**—shrewdness being demonstrated by being skilled in deception
- **Malice**—malignant hatred; a character trait that feels a need to see others suffer
- **Gossips**—a whisperer behind someone's back and spinning conspiracies
- **Slanders**—defaming others; one who attacks the reputation of another
- **Haters of God**—This is the hub of the wheel, characterized by an intense dislike of God.
- **Insolent**—the person who is characterized by their disrespectful acts or statements that are outrageously forward or bold
- **Arrogant**—a person characterized by feelings of unwarranted importance out of a sense of overbearing pride
- **Boastful**—the person who has a self-exalting, self-absorbed conceit of their own superiority, especially one who believes that all achievements are of their own doing
- **Inventors of evil**—the person who plans and strategizes how to commit shed blood, commit sin, and get away with it; inventing evil that did not previously exist; concocting bloodletting.
- **Disobedient to parents**—no regard for authority; a refusal to comply with those in authority
- **Without understanding**—no intelligent thought, those lacking the ability to understand the meaning or importance of something.
- **Untrustworthy**—covenant breakers; their word no longer means anything; those characterized by double-dealing behavior
- **Unloving**—no compassion; lacking affection for others, especially family
- **Unmerciful**—merciless; having no pity or sympathy or regard for the good of others

The culminating point is seen in verse 32, which sums up verse 18, and restates the judgment of God against all unrighteousness.

- ³² 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.

Paul comes full circle to the thought that sinner do not act out of ignorance. Granted, no one ever understands all the implications of the wrong they do; it still remains that we know enough to know that we are doing wrong.

As we look over these verses, don't let it escape your notice that knowledge of evil does not necessarily deter men from it.

The way sin operates at the start is with *the neglect of light*, which leads to *the rejection of light*, followed by madness, idolatry, vice, manifold evil, and malignant badness that takes satisfaction in wrongdoing.

The "death" sinners are worthy of is separation from God both spiritually and eternally. Paul concludes bluntly by saying, in essence: in our fallenness apart from the intervention of God, we are not only bent on damning ourselves, but we congratulate others in doing things that we know result in damnation.

CONCLUSION:

Let me conclude with some words of application.

- **HEED**—We must be careful what we do with the truth.
- **WORSHIP**—Worship God when you think of God.
- **URGENCY**—We cannot wait until people find it convenient to listen to the truth; we must take it to them.

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