

Quick Study Commentary Series:

Romans

Preview

By Chad Sychtysz

© 2024 Spiritbuilding Publishers.
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form
without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by
Spiritbuilding Publishers
9700 Ferry Road, Waynesville, Ohio 45068

QUICK STUDY COMMENTARY SERIES

Romans
By Chad Sychtysz

ISBN: 978-1955285-87-2

Spiritbuilding
PUBLISHERS

spiritbuilding.com

Table of Contents

Introduction to <i>Romans</i>	1
Salutation and Introduction (1:1–17)	7
Section One: The Righteous Are Justified by Faith (1:18—4:25)	
Gentiles Stand Guilty before God (1:18–32)	10
God Is an Impartial Judge (2:1–16)	16
Jews Also Stand Guilty before God (2:17–29)	20
All Have Sinned and Are Guilty before God (3:1–20)	22
We Are Justified by Grace through Faith (3:21–31)	24
Historical Examples of Justification by Faith (4:1–25)	27
Section Two: Benefits of Being Justified by Faith (5:1—8:39)	
The Benefit of Peace with God (5:1–21)	30
The Benefit of Newness of Life (6:1–23)	36
The Benefit of Freedom from Law’s Condemnation (7:1–25)	41
The Benefit of the Spirit’s Guidance (8:1–17)	46
The Consolation of Hope and Divine Assurance (8:18–39)	51
A RECAP OF ROMANS 1—8	56
Section Three: The Righteousness of God (9:1—11:36)	
God Has Not Failed in His Promises to Israel (9:1–33)	58
God’s Righteousness Shown to Israel (10:1–21)	62
God’s Righteousness Shown to Gentiles (11:1–36)	66
Section Four: The Righteousness of God Produces a Righteous Life (12:1—15:33)	
Righteous Conduct toward Fellow Christians (12:1–21)	71
Righteous Conduct toward Secular Government (13:1–14)	76
Righteous Conduct of the Strong and Weak (14:1—15:13)	80
A Proper Regard for Paul’s Ministry (15:14–33)	84
Paul’s Greetings and Final Admonitions (16:1–27)	87
Appendix: Calvinism (AKA Doctrine of Predestination)	91
Sources Used for <i>Romans Quick Study Commentary</i>	100
Endnotes	102

Preview

Introduction to *Romans*

There is no single book in the New Testament (NT) which provides as much detail and insight into Christian theology as *Romans*. This epistle delves into several critical themes: salvation, grace, mercy, faith, justification by faith, sin, redemption, man's free will, God's sovereign decisions, indwelling of the Holy Spirit, etc. It also provides practical application of these doctrines in the sphere of everyday Christian life (chapters 12—15). *Romans* is perhaps “the most significant theological letter ever written”¹ and “is widely regarded as the most significant of Paul's letters.”² Martin Luther called it “the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel.”³ Indeed, without it, our understanding of divine grace and the appropriate human response to that grace would be fragmented and incomplete.

However, as with all doctrinal treatises, *Romans* is admittedly an involved study.⁴ The fact that Paul took eight chapters to explain one statement, “the righteous man shall live by faith” (1:17), indicates that this is not going to be a casual read. Parts of *Romans* (e.g., 2:12–15; 5:12–18; or 7:14–25) are among the most difficult to understand in the entire NT. The underlying complexities and implications of such passages can be intimidating even to the seasoned Bible student (see 2 Peter 3:15–16). Commentators, lexicographers, and scholars have wrestled with these same passages, and such men are not always in agreement. It is likely that we, too, will wrestle with these; we also may not reach a consensus.

This does not mean that Christians should avoid the study of *Romans*. In it, Paul outlines the very basis for our relationship with God. He explains how (and why) an all-powerful God can and will accept into His fellowship those who are deserving of death. He also explains, in a manner unique to the NT, how the sinner is made righteous in God's sight. *Romans* also addresses the status of Israel: why Israel was chosen to be God's people; why the Law of Moses could not justify Israel; and what has happened to this relationship considering the gospel of Christ. These are not only important questions to the Jews of Paul's day; they bear directly upon God's faithfulness to all who are in covenant with Him.

Romans was written ca. AD 57. (Some scholars set the date as early as 56, others as late as 59.) The apostle Paul is unanimously accepted as its author. “The canonicity [i.e., recognition as a legitimate and inspired part of the NT] of *Romans* was never an issue in the Church. From the earliest beginnings of the formation of the NT canon its place within it has been secure . . .”⁵

It is likely that Paul wrote this treatise during his three-month stay in Corinth (in Achaia) during his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23ff), while waiting to return to Jerusalem after a lengthy absence.⁶ Having collected money for about a year from among the (predominantly) Gentile churches throughout Macedonia and Achaia, Paul's mission was to provide that money as benevolence toward the famine-stricken Christians in Jerusalem. After this important delivery, which also served to symbolize solidarity between Jewish and Gentile Christians, he had every intention of visiting the Christians in Rome (15:22–29). Unfortunately for him, Paul's plans were shattered when he was arrested in Jerusalem on a false premise and, after spending some two years in jail in Caesarea, Paul was sent to Rome as a prisoner, not as a free man (Acts 21—28).⁷

The many salutations in chapter 16 indicate that Paul was already acquainted with several brethren in Rome. The church there probably consisted of several small house-congregations, as was likely the case in Corinth or Jerusalem; Paul collectively addressed these brethren as one group (“to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints”—1:7). The church there was predominantly Gentiles, although Paul gives special attention to the Jews since the Jewish system was about to end. Paul's preaching of the gospel consistently emphasized “no distinction” in God's sight between ethnicities or nationalities (Gal. 3:27–29, Eph. 2:13–18), but this does not mean there was no occasion in Scripture in which specific groups (or their concerns) could be addressed.

Theme and Purpose: The theme of *Romans* is undoubtedly “the righteous man shall live by faith” (1:17). God first used this expression to the prophet Habakkuk to declare what He sought from Israel (Hab. 2:4). Paul not only expounded upon this expression but explained that it is the foundational premise upon which every soul—both Jew and Gentile—is saved. The first eight chapters of *Romans* deal directly with this question in a manner that highlights Paul's intense rabbinical training. The next several chapters (9—11) address the Jews considering this statement: If the Jews were given the Law of Moses, then how are they saved by faith? The Gentiles also had questions that needed to be answered: Did God keep His promises with Israel—and will He keep His promises with us? Does the inclusion of Gentiles into the salvation of God put them on par with the Jews, or is Christianity just another form of Judaism? Was God responsible for making the Jews unfaithful, or was God faithful in dealing with “hardened” Jews?

Both Jews and Gentiles needed to know exactly where they stood with God and with each other in this new world order called Christianity. Undoubtedly Paul had been dealing with these questions wherever he went; by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he chose to explain them fully in his correspondence with the Christians at Rome. (There is a practical reason for this: since Rome was the intersection of the world at that time, his writing would be quickly and easily dispersed abroad by sending it there.)

In the final chapters (12—15), Paul provides a practical explanation of how those who live by faith ought to conduct themselves, especially toward their fellow brethren, world governments, the “weak,” and all men. Paul ends with a lengthy salutation, as well as necessary warnings and final admonitions to Christians in Rome.

More specifically, some themes in *Romans* (often running concurrently) include the following:

- ❑ Without question, **faith** is the dominant theme of *Romans*. Faith’s power always lies outside of the one possessing it: faith by itself can do nothing, but faith in an all-powerful God has no limits. Being “justified by faith” refers to God’s acceptance of the condemned sinner’s plea for mercy, which appeals to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Paul never reduces faith to a mere concept, however, but consistently (in all his epistles) defines it as an active demonstration of one’s obedience to God. No one can come to God without faith; God defines faith as an appropriate response to whatever He wills to be done (Mat. 7:21).
- ❑ Paul spends a great deal of time talking about **grace**, even though he only infrequently uses the actual word. Saving grace is, in essence, everything that God does to compensate for human inadequacies and weaknesses regarding salvation. Put another way: grace is whatever God does that we cannot do to be saved. Christians need to know how a holy God can have fellowship with sinful people. This process needs to be explained considering law and grace: we need to know the relationship between these two things, and how they both affect human salvation. If we are justified by faith, then what need is there for law? But if we are required to keep God’s laws, then what is the role of saving grace? These are significant and timeless doctrinal questions; ultimately, every single Christian needs to come to terms with them.⁸
- ❑ “**Law**” is one of the more profound concepts of the entire epistle of *Romans*. Law provides a legal standard of expected behavior from

believers and unbelievers alike. Sin cannot be “imputed” or charged in the absence of divine law (4:15). Those who are not “in Christ” are under what might be called a universal moral law, which conforms to God’s divine nature (see comments on. 2:12–16). Those who *are* “in Christ” (i.e., Christians) are under “the law of the Spirit of life” (8:2), a.k.a. “the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Freedom in Christ does not mean freedom from obedience because obedience is necessary to demonstrate faith. Christians are “not under law but under grace” (6:14), but this speaks to how they are *justified* by God—by *grace*, not perfect *law-keeping*—not to exempt them from obedience to law.

- **Works** (in the context of the NT) refers to any act of human will. These acts may be in response to God’s word or merely attempts at self-justification. Works can be visible (Mat. 5:16) or invisible (John 6:29), natural (human actions) or supernatural (divine actions), moral (righteous) or immoral (unrighteous). Works can also refer to any system of justification by which a person is either approved or condemned, according to whatever that system demands or imposes. Works are required by the believer to prove his faith in God (James 2:26), even though the works themselves do not save him (Eph. 2:8–9).⁹
- **Fellowship** is implied in any discussion of grace since this is its ultimate objective. God desires fellowship with every person, but this is impossible without a soul’s faithful surrender to His will. The union of human faith and divine grace creates “newness of life” (6:4). Our good works (in obedience to God’s commandments) are not enough: good behavior is a characteristic of one who is in fellowship with God, not a definition of or replacement for fellowship. In *Romans*, Paul lays the groundwork for our fellowship with God and defines what is required from both God and the believer for this to exist.
- God’s **sovereignty** [lit., “sole rule”] is another sub-theme of *Romans*. This is covered both directly (chapters 9—11) and indirectly. Because of whom He is, God has the prerogative to make decisions based upon His omniscience and absolute authority. Some have assumed that God’s divine sovereignty thus overrules human free will. This is the basis for modern Calvinism (see Appendix 1), which teaches that God preselects (or predestines the eternal disposition of) every person prior to birth. While Paul does teach that Christ’s church is predestined for glory (8:29), he nowhere teaches that God takes full responsibility for a person’s salvation or his spiritual ruin. If God *did* take such

responsibility, this would contradict justification by faith—and this entire epistle, and the entire gospel of Christ.

- ❑ **Hope** is mentioned in *Romans* more often than in any other (NT) book. Paul repeatedly refers to hope as a matter of Christian doctrine and inspiration. For the believer, hope takes the place of the emptiness of Roman or Greek idolatry and paganism (Gal. 4:8–9, Eph. 2:11–12, and 1 Thess. 1:9). One is condemned and without hope who has broken the moral laws of God; yet “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). This hope is real and life-changing; it encourages the believer and demands action (for a positive result).
- ❑ **Sin** is the deliberate, active transgression of God’s will (divine law), whether the action is physical (visible) or psychological (mental). By necessity, the presence of sin demands the presence of a law which has been violated (3:20, 4:15, and 5:13). One who commits sin becomes a sinner; this action directly and immediately affects the status of the one who performed it. All people have become sinners (3:23) who are mentally competent to know the difference between right and wrong and are morally accountable to God for their actions. Sin condemns, corrupts, and destroys; nothing good ever comes from it. Apart from divine redemption, every sinner will be destroyed for having corrupted the sacred soul which God had entrusted to him.
- ❑ Paul also uses the word “**flesh**” many times in all his writings. “Flesh” can have different meanings, depending upon the context in which it is used. First, it can refer to what we are made of (“flesh and blood”—Eph. 2:11, Col. 1:22). Second, it can refer to one’s body or his identity as a human being (1 Cor. 6:16, Gal. 4:13). Third, it can refer to our earthly human nature that stands in opposition to God’s own divine nature; in this sense it is collectively referred to as the unconverted “world” (1 John 2:15–17).¹⁰ A person who is only “of the flesh” is hostile toward God, is not saved, and cannot save himself (8:6–9). Paul often refers to a person’s physical (earthly) body as the manifestation of human disobedience (since it is under a curse—Gen. 3:17–19). In other words, since a person’s body is corrupted by moral disobedience, and that which is corrupted must be destroyed or redeemed (1 Cor. 15:50), Paul speaks in *Romans* of the “body of death” (7:24) or the “sinful flesh” (8:3).
- ❑ **Justification** is undoubtedly one of Paul’s major themes in *Romans*. To be justified by something (or someone) means to be in right agreement (i.e., just) to whatever standard is used to make that determination.

In the case of one's salvation, it is the legal process by which a human soul is pronounced innocent according to God's divine standard of righteousness (see below). A sinless person needs no justification; a sinner can only be justified by the blood (life) of a perfect sacrifice that is offered in his place. The basis for a sinner's justification, then, lies outside of his own ability—through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (3:23–25). Yet, no one will be justified by God who does not put his faith in Christ's ability to save him.

- **Righteousness**, in Christian theology, works concurrently with justification. If one is justified, then he is righteous; if he is righteous, then he must (already) be justified. Both terms involve a right relationship with God, a person having satisfied what God requires for that fellowship to exist. Righteousness is a condition, status, or judgment (decision) conferred upon the believer by God.¹¹ In a sense, it is a legal pronouncement of divine approval (4:3); it is God's verdict of a person's state of being based his faith and demonstrated by his obedience. There are only two ways in which righteousness can be achieved: one's own worthiness, or the worthiness of another who is Himself proven worthy.¹²
- **Sanctification** (or holiness) refers to the process by which a person is consecrated by or made holy to God. Paul teaches in *Romans* that one can only be sanctified when two factors are simultaneously present: God's grace and a believer's faith. Justification is what God does *for* the believer, in the absence of his ability; sanctification is what God does *to* him (or in him) for fellowship to exist between the two parties. The Holy Spirit is directly involved in the sanctification process (8:6–9). The purpose behind sanctification is to set a person apart (*to* God and *from* the world) to offer a priest-like ministry—thus, the “living and holy sacrifice” terminology in 12:1–2.
- Finally, a dominant theme (in the latter part of *Romans*) is each Christian's **acceptance of one another**. Chapter 14 deals almost entirely with how one strong in faith should properly regard one weak in faith. (“Strong” here means learned or mature, not arrogant or unchallengeable; “weak” means unlearned or spiritually immature, not unwilling or lazy.) Our mutual respect “in Christ” is one of the hallmarks of those who are justified by faith. We would be at a tremendous loss without Paul's valuable exposition on this subject.

Salutation and Introduction (1:1–17)

Paul begins his epistle to the Romans with a powerful description of his own office as well as that of Christ (1:1–2).¹³ He immediately defends and provides authority for his apostleship, claiming to be “set apart for the gospel of God” (see Gal. 1:11–16).¹⁴ An “apostle” is literally “one sent forth or away with orders.”¹⁵ The term can be used generally (as in Acts 14:14 regarding Barnabas) or specifically (as Paul uses the term here). Christ’s apostles were all ordained (“called”) by Christ Himself, having been entrusted with His gospel to preach and defend as His personal ambassadors (cf. Acts 26:16–18).

Though he is an apostle, Paul regards himself also as a “bond-servant” [Greek, *doulos*] of Christ. Since Rome was filled with slaves, many of whom were educated even more than their own masters, Paul reminds the Romans that he also is a slave to the Highest Master. Thus, he immediately identifies with the slave population of the Roman Empire by stating, in essence, “I, too, am a slave—to Christ, not to mere men.” Later, he will state that all Christians must voluntarily become “slaves to righteousness” to serve the Living God (6:16–18).

Paul then defines the two-fold nature of Christ (1:3–4): according to the flesh, He is “a descendant of David”; according to heaven, He is “the Son of God.”¹⁶ If Jesus was not truly the anticipated Christ/Messiah of Old Testament (OT) prophecy, He could not be Israel’s King. He also could not have fulfilled (and thus, given closure to) the covenant between God and Israel. Similarly, if He is not the Son of God, He is an impostor and speaks without authority. If His divinity remained unproven, then all the promises He made to believers are not to be believed. Thus, it is imperative that Paul begins with these two facts: Jesus is the Christ *and* the divine Son of God (Mat. 16:16, John 20:31). This has been substantiated through divine prophecy, John the Baptist’s testimony, Jesus’ supernatural signs and miracles (most notably His resurrection from the dead), and God’s own testimony (Mat. 3:17, 17:5, and John 12:28).

Since he will be outlining some of the most important theological ideas that have ever been revealed from heaven, it is critical that Paul’s authority be legitimized. He says, in essence: “I have been directly commissioned by Jesus Christ, who is a legitimate heir to the throne of David and at the same time the Son of the Living God Himself, to reveal to you this message.” Having

established his apostolic authority, Paul's first proclamation is both powerful and positive: he identifies the Roman Christians as "the called of Christ" (1:6), "beloved of God," and "saints" (1:7).¹⁷ Their relationship with God was unquestioned; the rest of the epistle will deal with *how* that relationship came to be and what is expected of them since they are in it.¹⁸

Paul's Personal Remarks (1:8–15): Before proceeding to doctrinal matters, Paul first takes a moment to address these Christians on a personal level (1:8–15). He was anxious to see them; it was his full intention to make a brief visit to Rome on his way to Spain (see 15:22–29).¹⁹ It was also his intention to "impart some spiritual gift" to them (1:11)—i.e., to lay his hands upon them for the purpose of giving them miraculous gifts. Such is the necessary implication, based on similar situations (Acts 8:14–17, 19:1–6, 2 Tim. 1:6, etc.). This also implies that no apostle had yet been to Rome to perform this; otherwise, it would be pointless for Paul to mention it.²⁰ Whatever gift Paul had in mind, it was for the purpose of establishing (or strengthening) the Christians in Rome. He apologized, in a way, for not having already seen them, yet clarified that it was not for lack of desire but of time and opportunity (1:13). He was "eager" to preach to them in Rome but already had a full schedule as an apostle of Christ and ambassador to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:8–10).

Paul's Thesis: Justification by Faith (1:16–17): In 1:16–17, Paul begins an important theological discussion that will cover the next ten chapters. Despite the low opinion some people had of him (see 1 Cor. 4:8–13, 2 Cor. 10:10, etc.), Paul was "not ashamed of the gospel" (1:16).²¹ "Ashamed" is probably two-fold: first, Paul had no reason to be embarrassed by who he was (a Christian) or what he preached (the gospel). Second, he would not be disappointed or experience regret for having accepted this responsibility (cf. Mark 10:29–30). The Greek word for "ashamed" can mean either or both thoughts, and is used both ways in the NT.

The gospel is not a mere message of intellectual stimulation or entertaining myths (cf. Acts 17:16–21) but of "salvation"—a state of existence that is entirely beyond human ability to achieve by one's own strength or wisdom. Paul emphasizes the supernatural "power" of this message: the power to regenerate a dead soul (Eph. 2:1). "Power of God"²² is not applied to the mere *words* of the gospel, as though the Bible has regenerating power of its own. Rather, it is in the "living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23)—i.e., the divine message of the Holy Spirit, which, when obeyed, calls for divine

grace to heal an otherwise helpless human soul. This “word of God”—the “message of truth” and “gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13)—is the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. This power is universal in scope: it is available to Jews and non-Jews alike. Yet, it remains particular or conditional in its application: it is given only to those who “believe.” To “believe” necessarily requires a surrender of one’s will and the demonstration of obedient faith. While no one is saved *by* his works, to believe in God is a required work of faith (John 6:29).

The expression “to the Jew first” indicates that the gospel has been revealed methodically, in a certain sequential order. The “kingdom of God” which Jesus preached was directed only to the Jews for good reason: entrance into God’s kingdom was the culmination of promises made to the kingdom of Israel. The fact that many Jews did not accept Jesus as their King—and thus rejected this invitation—did not diminish the power of the kingdom or God’s decision to invite “the Jew first” (see Acts 13:45-47). “Greek” here can mean a Greek-speaking person, a cultured (Hellenistic) Greek, or simply a non-Jew (i.e., a Gentile); perhaps all these meanings can apply here, as the context seems very general. In short, this gospel is available to the entire world, to “whoever believes in Him” (John 3:16).

“For in it [i.e., the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed” (1:17)—that is, God’s fairness, justice, grace, and mercy are all made supremely evident within this message of salvation. “Before salvation can be completed, righteousness must be manifested. God, the righteous judge, must do righteous judgment in his court; and, in this court, man must secure the verdict, Righteous.”²³ God’s faithfulness—to His word, His promises, and us—is possible only because He is righteous (and vice versa). Whenever Paul says, “God is faithful” (1 Cor. 1:9), he is also saying, “God is righteous,” for it is impossible for Him to be one without the other.

Righteousness cannot be reckoned (credited) apart from human faith, nor can it be reckoned before this faith is expressed in the form of obedience. While righteousness is not a compensation (or payment) for faith, it is impossible for God to save a person who is capable of faith yet refuses to exercise it. In 1:17, Paul speaks of two parties that are “righteous”: God and those justified by their faith in Him. The fact that Paul quotes from Hab. 2:4 indicates that this is not a new teaching—it is not exclusive to the gospel of Christ—but has *always* been how sinners have been justified to God: through *faith*, not mere works, good intentions, or any other means.

SECTION ONE:

THE RIGHTEOUS ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH (1:18—4:25)

Gentiles Stand Guilty before God (1:18–32)

To establish that only God can justify a “righteous man,” Paul must prove that a person cannot be justified in any other way. If a person is capable of self-justification, then he would not need God. Yet, human history has proved that attempts at justification by any other means—by human effort, human wisdom, human laws, or idolatry—have failed miserably. For a person to be justified by God, however, he must have knowledge of the standard of justification (i.e., God’s revealed will). He must also come to terms with his own spiritual inadequacy: in his unjustified state of being, he stands condemned before God.

Paul begins this discussion by stating two fundamental truths revealed from heaven: God’s righteousness, which leads to a person’s salvation; and His wrath against unrighteousness, which leads to a person’s condemnation (1:18–20). Before discussing salvation, Paul first expounds upon one’s awful predicament for having abandoned God’s righteousness. While his comments concern “men” in general, Paul refers to heathens and pagans specifically—i.e., Gentiles who, in past ages, have been “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel,” and who had “no hope” and were “without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).²⁴ These men “knew God” (1:21) and His “ordinances” (i.e., God’s unwritten but necessarily-implied moral laws; see 1:32), but they still did not obey Him. These ordinances (or moral laws) pre-date even the Law of Moses, extending back to “the creation of the world” (see notes on 5:13).

The Consequences of Unbelief (1:18–32): Someone may ask, “Just how much did the ancient people know about God anyway?”²⁵ The scope of this information was small in comparison to what we know today. Nonetheless, God had provided sufficient evidence in the physical creation and in man’s

moral nature to warrant putting one's faith in Him. Concerning a person's self-inspection, it would be clear that:

- ❑ Human beings are the highest form of life on earth.
- ❑ Human intelligence is superior to any other intelligence on earth.
- ❑ Human enterprise and creativity are superior to any other animate activity on earth.
- ❑ Humans can reason, discern, communicate, emote, and create far beyond the level of any other earthly animalistic life.
- ❑ While animals operate by instinct and (to a limited degree) learned behavior, humans operate according to a sense of justice and morality that they can temporarily circumvent but cannot remove.
- ❑ Humans have a consciousness of themselves that transcends their physical bodies; this spiritual awareness permeates every race, culture, and historical epoch ever known.
- ❑ This spiritual awareness also compels human beings to give worship to a higher being (real or imagined), as a means of validating and giving meaning to their existence.

Such qualities are evident in all people; they are meant to lead us to seek out our Creator. We should not assume that physical or moral evidence alone can prove the sovereignty and omnipotence of God. Paul does not say, “That which *may* be known” about God but “that which *is* known” about Him.²⁶ God has always provided a reason to believe in Him—and thus to put one's faith in Him (Heb. 11:6). As Paul said in Athens (Acts 17:25–28):

He [God] Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist. . . .

God has revealed Himself through physical nature (i.e., things that have “been made”; see Heb. 3:4), transcendent morality, and human consciousness. He has also revealed Himself through His own Presence (Gen. 18:1ff, John 12:28–30, etc.), heavenly angels (Heb. 13:2), prophets (Heb. 1:1), law (Deut. 29:29), and His own Son (Acts 17:30–31, Heb. 1:2). Regardless of how (or how much) people knew of God, Paul's point is still valid: those who deny the observable and known evidence concerning God's existence are “without excuse” (1:20).

This means that such people have no legitimate claim to insurmountable ignorance, nor can they justify their disobedience. To “suppress” truth does not mean merely to ignore or fail to act upon it, but to hold it down—i.e., to “prevent truth from exerting its power in the heart and the life.”²⁷ We might picture a person holding someone’s head underwater to drown him: such is what people have tried to do, in effect, with the truth about God. Thus, it is a deliberate and malicious action, not an unconscious response. Yet, truth will not die, and it cannot be killed.

In suppressing the truth about God, people abandon all hope of spiritual enlightenment or self-improvement. Their unconverted minds descend into animalistic desires and pleasures. What begins as moral apostasy inevitably leads to deviant and self-destructive behavior (1:21–23):

- ❑ they knew God, but
- ❑ they did not honor Him, which meant
- ❑ they did not give Him thanks (i.e., were ungrateful), and thus
- ❑ they became futile (useless or vain) in their speculations—i.e., their own self-determined, mythological explanations of how they and the world came to be, etc., were unfounded, self-serving, and often absurd; thus
- ❑ their foolish heart—which was *made* foolish by having rejected the Source of its reason and intellect—was darkened, so that
- ❑ they worshiped nature (the creation of God) rather than God Himself, and images (idols) of gods of their own making.

Paganism and heathenism are not original religions of men but are themselves apostasies from the true religion of God.²⁸ “Darkness” (i.e., ignorance, depravity, and wickedness) indicates the absence of God’s divine influence, spiritual enlightenment, and objective reality (cf. Luke 11:33–36, John 3:18–21, and Eph. 4:17–19). People who persistently refuse the light of God become immersed in a thick moral darkness in which they can no longer function as rational, spiritual human beings but are reduced to hedonistic, inhumane, and barbaric creatures. God’s morality²⁹ becomes so diluted with self-indulgence that it loses all positive influence. Such people become fixated with self-gratification at any expense, regardless of the consequences. Thus, a darkened heart leads invariably to a darkened life—and a dreaded, hopeless future.

“Professing to be wise, they became fools” (1:22)—an ironic and profound indictment.³⁰ People who turn away from God always think they are *wise* for doing so; in some cases, the idea of a divine Creator is beneath them

and is cause for ridicule and scoffing. (This attitude is common in modern atheism.) Such “wisdom” is “earthly, natural, and demonic”; it creates “disorder and every evil thing” (James 3:15–16); it is morally and logically inferior to a healthy belief in God. Worshiping the *creation* rather than the *Creator* is a massive self-deception (1:23).³¹ “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal. 6:3).

Three times in this passage (1:24–32) we read that “God gave them over” to something far worse than that which the unconverted pagans began. As people abandon the truth of God, they also abandon the providential restraints that keep them from behaving like animals rather than those made in God’s image. This cannot mean that God tempted them to do evil (James 1:13) but that He allowed them to believe their lies as though they were true (2 Thess. 2:10–12). “[These] words sound to us like clods [of dirt] on the coffin as God leaves men to work their own wicked will.”³²

This moral abandonment always leads to sexual immorality and sexual deviancy, which are sins against one’s own body as well as God Himself (1 Cor. 6:16–18). “When a people cease to respect God, they will not long respect their own bodies. They give themselves up to passions of dishonor.”³³ This passage is nothing short of an explicit condemnation of effeminacy (of men) and homosexuality among both men and women. While many people today have desperately tried to downplay, reinterpret, or simply ignore this passage, it remains God’s strong denouncement of these practices. Thus, we see a typical digression:

- ❑ people sin against God by means of idolatry (of any kind), leading to
- ❑ sins against one’s own body, which leads to and often involves (in mutual fornication)
- ❑ sins against one’s fellow man.

“Natural functions” in this context refers to sexual identity and relationships that God established in the Creation (i.e., the natural order of things). God did not create women to have sexual relations with women, nor men...with men. “Unnatural” means that which God never intended; defiance against the natural order; corruptions of the image of God. In the Law of Moses, the mating of two incompatible things was an abomination against God simply because it defied (and corrupted) the natural order (Lev. 18:22–23, Deut. 22:5, 9–11). It is immoral for a man to “burn” with passion toward or have sex with another man because this desecrates the natural order and

defies the One who created it.³⁴ Such perverse mating creates an unholy union; such unions incur God’s wrath and punishment.³⁵ The only sexual union that God established in the beginning is between a man and a woman within the context of marriage (Gen. 2:24; see 1 Cor. 7:2). This union is holy (sanctioned by God); the marriage of a man and a woman forms the basic building block of society; and this union agrees with the ultimate spiritual union of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:31–32).

Having defiled themselves, those who abandon God then defile all those around them (1:28–32). “Depraved” (1:28) means unfit, rejected (by God), or reprobate: in having rejected God, men are rejected by God.³⁶ In this divine rejection, such men are “given” or “handed over” to pursue their rotten vice.³⁷ They are “filled with” (1:29) all sorts of godless and self-serving behaviors, all of which seek personal advancement or pleasure at the expense of someone else—and their own souls. Most of the crimes mentioned here (1:29–31) are self-evident; many of them are closely related; similar lists of vices are found in Gal. 5:19–21 and 2 Tim. 3:1–7.

- “unrighteousness”—the Greek word here [*adikia*] implies something unjust or unequal, namely, something that violates God’s justice or inequality.³⁸ Paul describes (in the first four vices mentioned here) a filled-to-the-brim depravity, a full measure (Prov. 1:31).
- “wickedness” here indicates something harmful, malicious, and grievous.³⁹
- “greed”: a desire for evil gain; a form of covetousness, “which amounts to idolatry” (Col. 3:5).
- “evil” (or maliciousness; licentiousness): in essence, anything opposed to or in defiance of God’s goodness.
- “envy”: an evil desire for what someone else has as a possession, talent, position, etc.
- “murder”: from a root Greek word meaning “to slay,” as in a selfish taking of another’s life.⁴⁰
- “strife”: contention, wrangling (over something), or unnecessary friction between two or more people as the result of selfish ambitions (1 Cor. 3:3, 2 Cor. 12:20, Titus 3:9, etc.).
- “deceit”: lit., something used as bait or trickery to purposely mislead someone.⁴¹
- “malice”: lit., a bad character; malignity; mischievousness.⁴²
- “gossips”: lit., a whisperer; to speak secretly into the ear.⁴³ Namely,