**Series Title:**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Paul's Letter to the ROMANS: Chapter 3**

***THEY DON'T CALL IT AMAZING GRACE***

***FOR NOTHING***

W

hat do we take for granted? How 'bout the night sky? In 1995 *Time* carried pictures of the Eagle Nebula taken through the Hubble Telescope. This galactic blob is 7,000 light years away! More than 400 million times the trip from Earth to our sun -- or roughly from here to the Super Bowl.

But Eagle's just a patch of luminous dust and gas spilled across the inky blackness -- so what. Likewise, many hear that God, who created it all, loves us passionately, even sacrificially, but we blow that off also as too "far out" to deal with.

***Buon Giorno, Roma!***

As Paul writes to Gentile and Jewish Christ-followers in Rome in the winter of A.D. 57-58, he knows the background of his fellow Jews. They'd embraced their former religion as laws and rituals in which Jehovah was *their* God alone, not every man's. Just as we ignore the skies, most 1st century Jews failed to acknowledge Jesus as God.

Some thirty years had now passed since Jesus' return to heaven. The impact of His life on earth, and the news of His crucifixion and miraculous return from death, had raced across the Roman world.

Millions had been captivated by this "God-with-us," by His payment for every man's sin -- a gift received not by earning or deserving it, but merely by faith in what He'd done for us on the cross.

Religions say, "If I try hard enough, I may be able to sneak into heaven." Only biblical Christianity says you can NEVER earn or deserve God's favor, so He offers it to you as a GIFT (Romans 11:6)!

This radical "Christianity" had roots in the Old Testament but wasn't spelled out there. For 1st century believers to understand it, Paul writes to say that being made right with God is a gift, not a reward. Salvation's not for sale. **Let's read perhaps the most eloquent passage in literature, Romans 3:1-31 (p. 1017).**

***Objections Overruled***

***Romans 3:1-8***

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul has established humanity's sinful plight. "BUT," his Jewish readers might be saying, "we're God's chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6). Don't we get a 'Get Out of Jail' for that!"

Paul hears them mutter, "Oy vey, we can't be THAT bad!" But despite their favored position, Jews are not immune to God's judgment and wrath. God had made them guardians of His very words as well as how He wanted to be worshipped (Exodus 19-20; Deuteronomy 4:8). God gave them the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), charging them with preserving and proclaiming His words until Messiah came (as a Baby in Bethlehem).

However, many Jews rejected the Scriptures AND their Messiah. But even if every person who ever lives disagrees with God (Psalm 116:11), He is always right (Romans 11:15, 25-27).

Many protest that if God's really so loving, how can He be so strict. Paul counters that God sets absolute standards based on His holy character, not on our squishy, human concepts of "fair play." Only God has the right to judge the world because He created it.

***"Separated From the Ones I Love"***

***Romans 3:9-18***

Paul opens his closing argument by delivering the universal indictment of God's charges against humanity. He first maintains that we're all without excuse before God, unable to save ourselves, or to deny to our Creator His right to also be our Judge. But that's the BAD news that precedes the GOOD news that "now" we all can receive, by faith, God's priceless pardon!

The Shirelles first sang it in '57, the Mamas and Papas in '67, and Linda Ronstadt in '96: "Each night before you go to bed, my baby; whisper a little prayer for me, my baby; and tell all the stars above this is dedicated to the one I love."

1,000 years before Christ's birth, David, the shepherd who became Israel's king, writes as if God is mourning the separation from the ones He loved, Adam and Eve, caused by their sin. **Let's read Psalm 14:1-7 (p. 488).**

Paul reminds the Jews that it's their sin, not their race that isolates man from God. Paul cites some OT verses to document that mankind, without exception, has gone "thumbs down" to God.

Prior to Christ's earth stint, the best example we had of what God is like was His Law, given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. If the Jews, to whom God had given the Law, were unable to keep it, then the rest of the world would've failed also, given their same advantage. As Jesus had told the Jewish authorities forty years earlier, "Moses gave you the Law, but not one of you obeys it" (John 7:19).

Our predisposition to not seek God, as both David and Paul state, puts us on the wrong course. That Hebrew word for "worship" (Romans 3:11) is "seek." God is saying that not a single human, in our natural state, sets out to put God in charge of his life, or desires to walk in His ways. It never happens -- not until God puts the desire in a person's heart, calling him to Himself.

The proof is our sin-polluted lives, our corrupt speech (Psalm 5:9 and 10:7) our trampled relationships (Isaiah 59:7-8). Sin affects us through and through -- plus everything we touch (Matthew 15:18).

The net effect of our failure to live God's way, Paul concludes, is that we have no reverence for (or fear of) God to restrain us (Psalm 36:1) -- no appreciation for who He is -- His holiness, power, rightness, purity, His all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere-present being. Only when we DO fear God do we see ourselves accurately -- as sinners, powerless to save ourselves. When we reach that humble state, only then are we ready for God to show us how to choose Him.

***All Rise to Hear "Guilty As Charged"***

***Romans 3:19-20***

Some folks, even the very religious, fail to "fear" (recognize) God and to acknowledge their sinfulness. Others, ignorant of who He is, are also spiritually shipwrecked. All are equally defenseless, and accountable to our Creator to Whom we owe our very existence.

Paul rests his case, saying God's law was not intended to save us. It was to demonstrate that we're sinners, unequipped to meet God's holy criteria. Only God can help us do that, and He does by simply "declaring" us to be "righteous!"

It's like "Call me a cab." "Okay, you're a cab!" God simply calls us righteous! (I know, it's pretty radical.) If we could earn that promotion another way, then we'd have bragging rights. But God freely bestows it on us, paid for, in full, by Jesus' sacrificial death.

Well, congratulations are in order! You've just survived one of the most grueling sections of the Bible. But unless we know what God wants to save us from, and how totally unable we are to save ourselves, we'd never be willing to turn to Him to receive the greatest gift of all -- our 100% undeserved position in God's family, with all its indescribable rights and privileges!!

***"Free At Last. Thank God A'mighty!"***

***Romans 3:21-26***

If all Bibles were burned, leaving only these six watershed verses -- its most important paragraph -- we'd know how to be spared from suffering forever without God in a place the Bible calls hell.

Paul, the erstwhile fiercely proud Jesus-hater, has just articulated the Bible's clearest explanation of our sin problem. How devastating if God were to leave us, lost, in "The Way We Were." But this grimmest of news precedes God's sin-shattering declaration that offers pardon for all! God's reprieve springs from His "grace." The Greek word for grace is "charis," implying an action that "delights" the giver. Paul says God takes pleasure in saving us sinners.

Before Christ gave to Paul his message of "salvation by faith alone," all men -- both Jews AND Gentiles -- came to God through Judaism (Isaiah 56:6-7). For 1,500 years the Jews had attempted to approach God through a well-defined, religious system of laws and ceremonies which they struggled to keep.

**"BUT NOW ……………… !!!!!"**

These two little words are the light at the end of the grimy sin-tunnel we've been trudging through since chapter 1. "But now" -- via Paul -- God rolls out an all-new way for all people to establish a one-to-one relationship with Him. Man had been incapable of meeting God's standard… **BUT NOW** God has extravagantly provided a *different* way for us to be made right in His eyes! He now offers us what He requires of us, i.e., His righteousness!

Simply stated, this new and different way is to accept, by faith, God's word that Christ's death paid for all the sins of all people, satisfying God's requirement for someone to endure physical death in our place so that we won't have to endure spiritual death (i.e., eternal separation from God in hell's 24/7/365 unquenchable fires).

The Good News is this: Jesus took our sin to the grave with Him. And He miraculously defeated death, signifying that those who follow Him will also! Trusting in Christ is the "only" way by which God will declare you and me "not guilty" (Galatians 2:16). Placing our faith in Him does not mean that we "understand" completely what He's done for us; it does mean that we "believe" and accept it!

Do you "understand" quantum physics (nothing more than "a walk in the quark"), or how planes take off, or how your brain works. We may not "understand," but we still "believe" a 355-ton 747 will fly!

Incredible that God would declare us "forgiven," choosing to see us "through His Son" as being …. **WITHOUT SIN!!!** -- BECAUSE HIS SON IS! Why live your life "hoping" you'll slip into heaven when you die? Or waiting 'til mañana when mañana may never come? When God declares you right with Him, you can take it to the bank. Heck, you can take it to the grave!

***Bragging Rights Denied***

***Romans 3:27-31***

Christ's death on the cross eliminates all religious merit systems. Only faith will get us right standing before God. Christ alone is our free ticket to eternity (Ephesians 2:8-9)! God hands that ticket to us when we agree with Him, in faith, that He's our Redeemer.

Only God Himself, walking this earth as a human, could keep the law. When we accept Christ as our Savior, God's Holy Spirit comes to reside in us, to give us the ability beyond ourselves to begin living up to God's standards after all!

Next time life is throwing you a spitter, remember that the flip side of being dragged down by our sins is -- "BUT NOW." Accepting Christ makes us like death row inmates who've been pardoned because somebody took the juice for us! Could that be why they call it ……"*amazing* grace."

***The Christ-mas Gift That Keeps On Giving***

"But now" you and I are no longer facing "the sin question." It's now "the Son question." (a) Will we accept God's free gift of forgiveness, paid for by His Son Jesus? (b) Or will we reject it? There is no "none of the above" (John 3:18).

If you've never done so, simply receive God's best Christmas gift. Just tell him -- "Father, I don't know why You love me enough to send Your Son to pay the penalty for my sin, but I believe You did. Thank You for that. I'm ready to begin walking with You. Thank You for being my Lord and Savior. Please teach me to really know You. Because of what Jesus did for me, I offer this prayer. Amen."

His Deal

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