

STUMBLING FORWARD

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You can ask God for anything! When you pray, every sincere subject is welcomed. But sometimes, you should thank God that He did NOT give you all you asked Him for.

Sometimes, Lean is Not Good

There is an illuminating, yet frightening, perspective of Jewish history presented in Psalm 106, that addresses this very issue. Listen, as the songwriter describes Israel's blundering discovery of their God, Jehovah, during the exodus from Egypt:

Psalm 106:7 Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Your wonders; They did not remember the multitude of Your mercies, But rebelled by the sea—the Red Sea.

⁸ Nevertheless He saved them for His name's sake, That He might make His mighty power known.

⁹ He rebuked the Red Sea also, and it dried up; So He led them through the depths, As through the wilderness.

¹⁰ He saved them from the hand of him who hated them, And redeemed them from the hand of the enemy.

¹¹ The waters covered their enemies; There was not one of them left.

¹² Then they believed His words; They sang His praise.

¹³ They soon forgot His works; They did not wait for His counsel, ¹⁴ But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, And tested God in the desert.

*¹⁵ And He gave them their request, **But sent leanness into their soul.***

Here is that last verse, from The Message: "He gave them exactly what they asked for—but along with it they got an empty heart." How sad.

Jesus asked the question, "What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?" Not a good exchange, is it?

A Great Revelation

Let's consider the words of the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome, Romans 1:16-32.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ^{1:17} For the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel from faith to faith, just as it is written, "The righteous by faith will live."

As I have affirmed repeatedly, Paul's letter to the church in Rome is his exposition, or explanation, of the Gospel (the Good News that Jesus brought). He was convinced, and endeavored to persuade his readers, that the Gospel alone reveals and confirms the righteousness of Almighty God in His dealings with humankind, attesting to it in the righteousness that is *from* God through Jesus Christ.

Why the Gospel, and the Gospel alone? Because this righteousness cannot be found by observation or investigation of the created world around us. It cannot be discovered by reasoning or imagining.

The righteousness which is of God and from God is only found when our faith encounters God's faithfulness in the person of Jesus Christ. *"From faithfulness to faith."*

There is no other path to salvation. There is no other way that yields eternal life. That is what Jesus came to show us, and He showed it not only with His words, but with His whole life.

If any human being is ever to know his or her Maker, it must be through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no alternative; there is only one way. That is true, because of what Paul says next.

A Buried Truth

If we are to recognize and enjoy the blazing light of the Gospel, it must be seen in its stark contrast to the utter darkness of our own sinfulness.

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness, ^{1:19} because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ^{1:20} For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse.

People cannot honestly say they didn't know that God exists, because that simple fact can be known by everyday observation of the created world around. It's not rocket science. It doesn't require a giant intellect. What can be known about God through nature—His power and His greatness—is plain for all to see. In the sun. In the stars. In the wind. In the rain. In the world of plants, and in the world of animals. In the enduring order. The Creator God exists!

Romans 1:21 For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened.

Aware, even only at an elemental level, of God's existence, people still ignore Him, considering life's source to be impersonal—something like fate, karma, or coincidence.

They refuse to give thanks to Him, deeming themselves somehow entitled to life and its fullness, whenever they taste it.

As a result, without any real sense of God, they make fruitless assumptions and speculations about themselves and the world in which they live. They boast of their abilities and their intentions, and bemoan life's injustices and disfavor. Without the Gospel, they cannot do more.

Romans 1:22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ^{1:23} and exchanged (traded) the glory of the immortal God for an image (like a drawing, a painting, a sculpture, or a concept) resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (mere created things).

Humans suppress the truth of their sinfulness, of their need for God. Even in contradiction to the voice of our own consciences.

We justify our own choices and actions, often at the same time that we accuse others who do the same things.

Rationalizing our sinfulness leads to hardness of heart. It builds a wall between us and God. A wall that shades the light of truth. A wall that muffles the sound of truth.

Worse yet, suppressing the truth in these ways initiates the decline of human character. We stumble into darkness.

Three Steps Down

In the remainder of this passage, Paul describes three stages of our decline into darkness, each corresponding to God "giving us over" more and more to our own willfulness.

Step One: the Loss of Freedom

God withdrew His divine grace, in the form of restraint, and let the peoples' lusts overtake and control them. He let them have what they insisted that they wanted. He gave them what they asked for. This led to the loss of a very important freedom (the freedom from sin's control).

Romans 1:24 Therefore God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to dishonor their bodies among themselves.

Their lusts become unchecked and uncontrolled, and produced in them an insatiable emptiness and the accompanying compulsions (compulsive excesses) that seek to fill their bottomless appetites. Morals were loosed. Lusts morphed into impurities.

Impurity is the bedfellow of idolatry; one always leads to the other, as with Balaam's advice to Balak, king of Moab, in Numbers 22. Though Balaam would not curse God's people, he *"showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin"* (Revelation 2:14).

Romans 1:25 *They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creation (!) rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*

Step Two: the Loss of Dignity

Romans 1:26 *For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged the natural sexual relations for unnatural ones (i.e., contrary to their nature), ^{1:27} and likewise the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed in their passions for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

There are passions that bring or show honor and other passions that bring dishonor. This is the stage of "dishonorable passions," where human nature is violated and people are victimized—humiliated, dishonored, disgraced.

Such acts go beyond mere lustful excessiveness, into violation of natural design, eclipsing the image of God. Webster described this "penalty" as being in their bodies and personalities.

Step Three: the Loss of Humanity

Romans 1:28 *And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God (thought it worthless to get to know Him), God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what should not be done (what is unfitting, contrary to divine design).*

At this stage, one's intellectual, moral, and spiritual identity becomes compromised—this is depravity. A psyche devoid of human decency. A life characterized by sociopathic, inhumane behaviors—terrible cruelties and heartless indifference, as Paul then enumerated.

Romans 1:29 *They are filled with every kind of unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, malice. They are rife with envy, murder, strife, deceit, hostility. They are gossips, ^{1:30} slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, contrivers of all sorts of evil, disobedient to parents, ^{1:31} senseless, covenant-breakers, heartless, ruthless.*

And, as if it weren't bad enough that they *did* such things...

Romans 1:32 Although they fully know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also approve of those who practice them.

Are These the Last Days?

Compare these conditions to Paul's description of the Last Days Generation in 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

2 Timothy 3:1 You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times.

² For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred.

³ They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. ⁴ They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. ⁵ They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!

Sin's Remedy

Yet, not one of the three "giving overs" that Paul described is without remedy. You may not yet have stumbled all the way down, but even if you have, you have not fallen beyond the reach of Almighty God.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 confirms this:

1 Corinthians 6:9 Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality,¹⁰ or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.

¹¹ Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Look at that last verse with me:

1 Corinthians 6:11 Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (Your part and His.)

Jesus Christ has redeemed you—not by His goodness, not by His eloquence, not by His power, but by the shedding of His lifeblood in your place.

If you will lay down your sin at His feet, He will raise you up with overcoming grace to an everlasting newness of life!

Sin may give pleasure for a season, but it *takes* for a lifetime! It leads to a world of darkness.

Sin is a destroyer—of freedom, of dignity, of humanity. Sin damages individual lives, families, and nations.

Who is here today who wants to recover from stumbling into darkness? Who wants to be freed from sin's captivity and shame?

Have you lost your freedom to controlling lusts?
Have you lost your dignity to debasing behaviors?
Have you lost your sense of human decency?

Jesus Christ has come to set you free and restore God's image in your life.

What we are incapable of doing for ourselves, Christ came to do on our behalf!

Will you call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ this morning and invite the Spirit of God to work redemptively in your life?

He did it for me. I know He will do it for you, too. Just ask Him.