

## II. The Marrow of the Gospel - Justification by Faith (1:18-4:25)

Paul's great desire with respect to the Romans was that he should be God's instrument to establish and encourage them in the faith. He considered himself to be under obligation to all the Gentiles, so that he longed to bear some fruit among the Romans as he had in the other communities in which he had ministered. He was a servant of Christ in the work of His gospel, and his eagerness in discharging his ministry reflected his confidence and hope not in himself or his own conversion, but in the gospel. Paul knew the gospel to be the "*power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.*" The gospel's power pertains specifically to the salvation of men and it is manifested toward all who believe, both Jew and Gentile.

Most importantly, its power resides in its revelation and mediation of the righteousness of God Himself. The gospel is powerful to save and sanctify not because it informs social or personal ethics or moral rectitude; these are simply the veneer of a human righteousness that provides a gloss on the faithless deformity of the human heart. Such "righteousness" is bankrupt and so has no power in the matter of salvation. It is the promise of God's righteousness - His own glorious perfection - satisfying the demands of justice and being reckoned to men through faith that makes the gospel the singularly powerful and sole means of salvation.

The glory of the gospel and its absolute necessity for salvation lie in its concern with and provision of the righteousness of God. But the reason this is so is the fallen condition and abject spiritual destitution of man. *The hope of human rectitude is found only in a reckoned righteousness for the simple reason that all men are devoid of righteousness, both personally and provisionally.* There is no inherent righteousness within them as creatures, nor are they able to secure it through personal efforts. Against this gloomy backdrop of human despair the righteousness of God as a gift of faith shines in all its radiant glory.

### A. The Problem of Sin (1:18-3:20)

Thus it is that, having established his gospel of divine righteousness in the minds of his Roman readers, Paul proceeded to set it in sharp relief against the universal bankruptcy and despondency of the human condition. For the next sixty-four verses he would paint for them a thorough and humiliating portrait of fallen man (1:18-3:20), and not until that work was done would Paul formally introduce to the Roman Christians the glorious reality of justification by faith (3:21-4:25). For they could not fully grasp the greatness of their endowment - the supreme treasure that is God's own righteousness obtained by faith - until such time as they were brought to the settled conviction of their absolute destitution of personal righteousness and personal remedy.

And so, Paul's portrait of the human condition properly begins with a discussion of the nature and effects of sin and the culpability it incurs (1:18-32), and is completed with his insistence that *all* men equally share in sin's stain and guilt (2:1-3:20). As if to put a capstone on the edifice he has built, this section concludes with a series of short quotations from the Scripture, proving to his readers that his stinging indictments did not originate with him, but were the testimony of God Himself (3:9-20).

It cannot be overemphasized that an accurate perception of the nature and effects of sin is fundamental to understanding the biblical gospel, even as the fact of sin's existence is the very reason for the redemption proclaimed by the gospel. Further, the gospel's central doctrine of justification by faith - justification upon the basis of a *reckoned* alien righteousness - is nonsensical except where absolute need has been established in the minds of men. But because Paul began his discourse on the human condition with certain presuppositions already in place, it is necessary to establish his presuppositions by "beginning at the beginning." That is, until a person understands the nature of man as a creature and the dynamics of his fall into sin it is impossible to fully grasp Paul's forthcoming argument. This foundational understanding depends upon a careful consideration of the first three chapters of Genesis, and for this reason the exposition of Romans 1:18-3:20 must begin there. Three separate topics will be considered: *the creation of man, the dynamics of man's fall, and the consequences of man's fall.*

### **The Creation of Man**

The gospel is the core theme in the Roman epistle, and man's calamity and recovery are central to the gospel. But one cannot rightly discern man's plight and restoration without understanding the nature, operation, and consequence of sin. In turn, the knowledge of sin demands a biblical knowledge of *man himself*. This is evident from the fact that, in the realm of God's physical creation, sin is uniquely a *human* issue; it is not the property of any other material creature. Two inferences readily follow:

- The first is that man is somehow and to some extent unique from the rest of God's physical creation.
- The second is that, since sin also affects angelic beings, the angels must also share the specific aspect of man's uniqueness that makes him susceptible to sin.

These two inferences lead to the conclusion that it is man's *rationality* and *spirituality* that are implicated in the problem of sin. For these are the two creaturely qualities human beings have in common with angelic beings. This is not simply a logical deduction; it is the plain testimony of Scripture. As a rational and spiritual being man is unique in the material creation. For this reason, in both its *structure* and *content*, the Bible's creation account is directed toward man as the pinnacle and focal point of God's creative work.

From the **structural** standpoint, the Genesis creation event consists of six discrete creational episodes partitioned thematically into two *triad* sections of three days each.

- 1) The first triad, consisting of the first three creation days, is concerned with God's ordering of the initial formless chaos of the earth (v. 1:2) into *three static spheres*. Each of these spheres represents a specific realm or *domain* of creation in which *dominion* is to be exercised.
  - a) Day One recounts God's bringing forth of *light* as the fundamental point of order in a dark, disordered cosmos (1:3-5; cf. 1:1-2).

*From the point of this initial act of creation the Bible attributes to the opposing principles of light and darkness a crucial and progressive spiritual significance in the upward movement of redemptive history.*

- **Darkness** becomes representative of the various aspects of *disorder* associated with the entrance of *sin* into the world, and the alienation, misery, desolation, and destruction that inexorably follow in its wake (cf. Deuteronomy 28:15-29; 1 Samuel 2:1-9; Psalm 74:18-23, 82:1-8, 88:1-7, 107:1-14; Lamentations 3:1; Ezekiel 8:1-12; Joel 2:1-2, 3:9-15; Amos 5:18-20; Micah 3:1-6; Nahum 1:1-8; etc). Accordingly, the ultimate manifestation of darkness is hell itself (Matthew 8:11-12, 22:1-13, 25:14-30).
- **Light**, on the other hand, represents *order*. Therefore, it is a symbol used first and foremost in reference to *God Himself* (1 John 1:5), and by extension to everything associated with Him. Beyond that, it further is expressive of the life and fullness gained by man through his communion with God (cf. Exodus 10:21-23, 14:10-20; Leviticus 24:1-4; 2 Samuel 22:29-30; Psalm 4:1-8, 18:28, 27:1, 36:5-10, 104:1-2, 112:1-4; Isaiah 2:1-5; Micah 7:1-8; etc.).

As God is declared in the Scripture to be the light both of man and the cosmos he has brought under the curse, so this symbolism comes to its full expression in *Immanuel*. He is preeminently the *light of the world* (cf. Psalm 118:1-29 with Matthew 21:1-9 and John 8:12, 12:20-46; ref. also Isaiah 9:1-7, 59:1-60:22; Matthew 4:12-17; Luke 1:76-79).

Thus the creation of *physical light* was the means for dispelling the *darkness* of the initial cosmic chaos. This relationship, in turn, supplies important spiritual symbolism used throughout the rest of the Bible. It is for this reason that Paul could correlate the creational entrance of light into the cosmos with the divine illumination of the human soul in regeneration (2 Corinthians 4:1-6).

Furthermore, as the creation of light was the first act of God on the stage of redemptive history, so the destruction of darkness is seen to be His last act at its culmination (Revelation 22:1-5). *In the very beginning light dispelled the disorder of the primeval chaos; at the end of the age the light that is God Almighty and the Lamb will finally and forever dispel the darkness of the chaos and disorder of sin and death.*

- b) Day Two has God bringing further order by separating the waters through the creation of the *firmament*, or *heavens*. In this way He made a division resulting in waters above and below the partition of the firmament. Thus the second creation event served to isolate and establish the two related domains of the *sky* and the *seas* (1:6-8).

- c) Day Three continues God's process of ordering His creation by the emergence of the *dry land* and the *vegetation*. Together these constitute the last static sphere or domain of the physical creation (1:9-13).
- 2) Whereas the first triad of creation episodes is concerned with the establishment of the various domains of the created order, the second triad pertains to the *lords* of each domain. That is, it introduces the creatures that exercise dominion in each of the given spheres. Furthermore, the corresponding "lord" emerges in the same order as its respective domain, so that Day One corresponds to Day Four; Day Two corresponds to Day Five; and Day Three corresponds to Day Six.
- a) Day Four finds the creation of the *great lights* - the sun, moon, and stars - appointed by God to rule the sphere of day and night. And because the intervals of day and night are the basic units of the passage of time, these cosmic rulers also govern celestial signs, seasons, and years (1:14-19).
  - b) Day Five has God bringing forth the lords of the sky and seas, namely the *birds of the air* and the *sea creatures*. That they are rulers of their domains and not merely inhabitants is made evident by God's use of the language of dominion in reference to them: "*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth*" (1:22; cf. 1:28).
  - c) Finally, Day Six pertains to the creation of the *land animals* as the lords of the dry land and its vegetation (1:24-25).

Although the sixth day also includes the creation of man, the Scripture sets him out as a *unique creature*, brought forth in a *unique act of creation* (cf. 1:24 and 1:26), and exercising a *unique place* in the created order.

- Man was created to be the **supreme lord** of God's creation; he was to "*rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth*" (1:26b, 28).

In this way he is shown to be the pinnacle of God's created order: the creation sequence first recounts the establishment of the various domains or *spheres of dominion*, and then proceeds to introduce the *created things that exercise lordship* within each domain. Last of all comes *man*, and his emergence at the end of the creation account is meant to indicate both his uniqueness and his lordship over everything that preceded him.

- Much more, man's uniqueness is seen in his being the divine **image-bearer**. Of all the countless creatures that comprise God's creation, man alone bears the image of his Creator (1:26-27). *Indeed, as will be seen, man's nature as image-bearer is absolutely essential to his purpose and function within the created order.*

Not only the structure, but also the **content** of the Genesis creation account testifies to man's place of preeminence in God's purpose. This is evident from the data of chapter one, and is further supported by the content and thrust of chapter two. Through the centuries scholars have debated the nature of the relation between these two chapters. But when the orientation and emphasis of chapter one are discerned, the significance of chapter two becomes more readily discernible.

- 1) The first thing to observe is that this chapter introduces the first of ten "generations" sections that subdivide Genesis into cohesive contexts. In turn, these contexts are focused upon certain individuals who represent important milestones in the movement of redemptive history. The generations section that begins in chapter two is referred to as the "*generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created*" (2:4). It is unique in that, among the ten sections, it alone is not associated with the generations (lines of descent) of individual men (ref. 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1, 37:2).

The Scripture's progress through these generations sections shows that the emphasis of the storyline of Genesis is *redemptive-historical*. That is, the concern of the text is the upward movement of God's interaction with humanity that has its goal in Jesus Christ and His great, comprehensive work of redemption. This being the goal of history, the Genesis record appropriately begins with the division of mankind into two groups associated with Cain and Seth. From that point it tracks the movement of the two lines of humanity - those who know God and those who don't - focusing particularly upon the progress of the "godly line" as that which would finally reach its predetermined destination in the Incarnation.

Thus the reason the creation record begins with the "generations of the heavens and the earth" is that the created order itself is the starting point of the "line of descent" that reflects the outworking through subsequent history of God's eternal purpose; a purpose whose ultimate realization is shared by the whole creation, and not simply man (cf. Romans 8:12-25; Ephesians 1:3-12; Colossians 1:15-20). More precisely, because this first "generation" covers the period until the emergence of Noah (Adam's line of descent is the subject of the second generations section), it is seen to pertain not to a specific human line per se, but to the "former world"; that is, to the antediluvian form of the heavens and earth that began with the initial act of creation (1:1) and ended with the Noahic Flood (ref. 2 Peter 3:1-7). *Even so, because the redemptive destiny of the created order has unique reference to man, in that it finds its terminus in the God-Man, so the generations section that begins the second chapter of Genesis must also have its focal point in man and his role in bringing redemptive history to its fulfillment.*

- 2) The implication of this summary observation is that Genesis 2 ought not to be viewed as merely a restating of the creation account from a different perspective. Much less is it a separate version altogether - a version regarded by some as standing in contradiction at certain points to the prior account. Far from being redundant or contradictory, it picks up where chapter one leaves off.

For the first chapter addresses man's creation, thereby introducing his uniqueness in the created order. Chapter two finds God taking His unique creature and placing him *in His own sanctuary*, which is the Garden of Eden (2:7-15). And so while Genesis 1 reveals man's nature as image-bearer and its *functional* importance to his role as vice-regent of the earth, Genesis 2 discloses the *relational* importance of man being created in the image of God.

- a) Man was not created simply to exercise dominion over the works of God's hands; if this were the extent of his purpose it would be unnecessary for him to be made in God's image and likeness. Man was created for the sake of *communion* with His Creator; this purpose alone explains his nature as image-bearer. For in order for man *the creature* to commune in perfect intimacy with the divine *Creator*, he must bear in himself the *nature* of God to the extent of the capability of a created being. He must share in the likeness of God to be able to interact with Him in intimate fellowship.
- b) That man's preeminent purpose for existing is communion with His God and Creator is attested by his being placed in the garden paradise the Lord made for him. For Adam's place of habitation was also *God's sanctuary*; in the perfection of the initial order of things man found his own perfection and fullness in a life lived in the very presence of God (cf. Genesis 3:8; Isaiah 51:1-3; Ezekiel 28:12-14, 31:1-9; also cf. Revelation 2:7 with 21:1-22:5, 22:14).

The blessedness of this communion in God's garden-sanctuary is emphasized by the fundamental themes associated with it. They include the immediate presence of God, the defining principles of rest and peace (the principle of *sabbath*), abundance, security, and dominion. These themes are inseparable from the garden/sanctuary/kingdom concept in the progress of redemptive history, reemerging together first in the typological "paradise" of Canaan, and later in the spiritual kingdom of God that is entered through faith. Finally, they are manifested in the consummative perfection of the paradise-sanctuary that is the New Jerusalem and the new heavens and earth (Isaiah 65-66; Revelation 21-22).

Having placed Adam in His garden-sanctuary, the final step in the creation process was for God to cause Adam *himself* to recognize his distinction from the rest of the creatures, and thereby come to comprehend and so enter into his unique role and privileged relation with His Creator. This was to be accomplished through the task of naming the animals, leading to the creation of the woman. As the result of carefully scrutinizing each of the Lord's creatures Adam was brought to the realization that there was not among them all "*a helper suitable for him*" (2:18-20). His unique status as divine image-bearer left him isolated and alone in the world. If there were to be another creature suitable to him, such a one would have to be *like* him; she would have to also share the divine image (ref. 1:27). Thus God brought forth Eve from Adam, and he named her *woman*, for "*she was taken out of Man*" (2:21-23). So ends the work of creation: a perfect world presided over by God's beloved and devoted image-bearer; yet this perfection was to be short-lived.