

The Greatest Explanation of Our World...Ever

Romans 1:21-32

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My title is, *The Greatest Explanation of the World...Ever*. I dare you to find any text of any writing in any book or literature that better explains why our world is the way it is.

Who cares? I'm going to begin with the same assumption that you do. We all do. If we don't care about the world generally, we all care about our world personally. Even the guy who's gone off the grid, not paid his taxes in three decades, and only signs his name with an X. Even that guy cares deeply about his personal world. We all do.

We all have a perspective or worldview by which we explain or understand why things are the way they are. Our explanations are an amalgamation of our life experiences, teachings we follow, books we've read, people who have shaped us, joys and sorrows, etc.

Then things happen that challenge our grid. A major disappointment. Cancer. Death of a loved one. 9/11. All things that are real, undeniable, but our grid can't explain. These types of events challenge our belief grid. I think of the national debate right now following the shooting at the school in Parkland, Florida. *How could this happen? What is the cause? Who is the problem? What is the solution?* These same questions will be asked after the next tragedy.

All along, the Bible waves its hands with its explanation. An explanation that has stood the test of time, triumphs, and tragedies. It uniquely explains why things are the way they are. Everything from 9/11 to Parkland, to what you are distraught about today. We have a lot of ground to cover.

Remember last week we learned Paul's explanation of the gospel begins with God's wrath against sin and sinners. It's the bad news that makes the good news good. God has revealed himself to mankind through the majesty and grandeur of creation. It says enough about God and truth that men are without excuse.

"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Romans 1:21 ESV)

The Apostle Paul summarizes the human story after Adam and Eve's sin. The created world reveals God, but in spite of this innate knowledge of him, humans have continued down a resolute path of living as if there is no God. If there is a God, then two things are required. *Honor and thanksgiving*. But notice, we do *"not honor him as God or give thanks to him."* The root of the word for "honor" is *glory* or *glorify*.¹ The Westminster Catechism says the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. That is what God made us to do and made us to be like. But mankind in sin refuses to do that. The root of sin is a refusal to glorify God. A refusal to worship him. A refusal to honor him as the ultimate reality or person. *No. I will not live in submission to you, God. I will not place you in a spot of higher significance than me. I will not view your will as more important than my own.*

¹ See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, p. 88.

"Or give thanks to him" – We give thanks for things that are given to us. We get a gift, we write a thank you note. Mankind refuses to write God a thank you note. Why? Gratitude implies grace. We don't want to be beholden to anyone—even God. We are the masters of our own destiny.

Fallen man wants God out of the picture entirely. When the universe pulsates with God's presence and glory, how can he do that? How can you go to Disneyworld and deny the existence of Disney? The only way is to so deny and suppress the truth about Disney that you can stand next to Space Mountain and deny what is plainly before you. *There is no Disney! Hello Mickey! Hello Minnie! There is no Disney!* It is to suppress it so much that you sincerely think it's not there.

Paul describes this as *futile thinking* and *foolish hearts*. This is a theme in Romans. Wrong worship leads to wrong thinking about everything. It has to because God is the starting point of all reality. Right thinking starts with God and explains everything in light of him. No matter how brilliant you are, if you begin with the wrong assumption, your conclusions can only be wrong. All the philosophers and intellectuals, all the scientists and pundits who opine on truth and life and meaning, their answers are futile and ultimately empty. Proverbs summarizes it with, "*The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'*"

Last week Stephen Hawking died. Incredible mind. Incredible determination to do life from a wheelchair. Brilliant. Genius. Off the charts. But he denied the existence of God and sought to explain the universe without him. They named the movie about his life, *The Theory of Everything*. Hawking looked and looked, but ultimately didn't find it.

When the truth is suppressed and the truth is denied, man has to live according to something. We were made to worship and if God isn't our focus of worship, someone or something must take his place.

"*Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*" (Romans 1:22-23)

Truth is suppressed. Then denied. Then exchanged. What a horrible trade! The glory of immortal God. How much is he worth? It doesn't matter to fallen man. Fallen man is ready to barter that away. *Who wants to trade? I've got the glory of God. What will you give me for it?* What does man trade for God's glory? Images. Icons. We call them idols. In the ancient world they would make idols to represent their worship. These images could be anything, hence the description of men, birds, animals, and creeping things. The ancient world was filled with "gods," most of which were made to look like something in this world. These counterfeit gods represented man's worship of himself.

So these gods represented man's most important priorities: material success, military success, fertility, sexual pleasure. From Baal to Ashteroth to Venus to Aphrodite. Man-made gods correlated to our desires in this world. Material success, power, and sex continue as gods to this day. We look to them for comfort, hope, and meaning. All of them are replacement gods for the one true God.

Friends, we have seriously traded down! Did you hear about the guy who traded his new Lamborghini for a used Yugo? Crazy! Who would do that? Somebody whose thinking had become completely futile. (That didn't really happen, by the way. It's just an example.)

Did you hear about the person who traded God for money? For moral independence? For sexual freedom? For fame? For anything? Who would do that? You and me and every person we know. Why? We suppress the truth. We deny the truth. And then we trade the truth in the worst deal of all time!

Our text for Easter will be verses 24-25. He basically says humans don't see God in creation, rather they see creation as God. The ultimate rejection of the Creator who gifts a good creation to man is for man to choose the gift over the giver. The thing created instead of the one who created it. The result of wrong thinking and misplaced worship is immoral living.

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." (Romans 1:26-27)

I want you to see something. Look at verse 24, "Therefore God gave them up *in the lusts of their hearts.*" Verse 26, "For this reason God gave them up *to dishonorable passions.*" Verse 28, "Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up." That repetition is a general outline. Man fails to acknowledge God; God judges humanity by giving them up. This means that God gives us what we want. We demand freedom from God, and God says, *if it's freedom you want it's freedom you'll get.*

*"Divine judgment is God permitting people to go their own way."*² (Robert H. Mounce) C.S. Lewis says this choice by man allows him to "Enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved."³ Rather than free to worship God, we are free to be self-enslaved. Sounds great, doesn't it? This is like teenagers chafing under the authority of their parents, wishing they were free from the oppressive curfew and the requirement to make their beds. They have no idea that their parents' care and love is restraining all kinds of horrific consequences in their lives. They think freedom is better, but it's not long until they are living in a van down by the river.

God doesn't have to enact punishment for sin. Sin is its own punishment. Perhaps not immediately, but over time, who pays the penalty for an immoral lifestyle? The chickens eventually come home to roost. We live in a moral world where sin corrodes us. Degrades us. It slowly and imperceptibly drains our life of meaning.

The second evidence of God's departure from man's reality is man's utter rejection of God's design for gender and sexuality. I realize that's not a hot news item right now.... Actually this is ripped from the front page of our world. Same sex marriage. Transgenderism. Which bathroom to use. Who gets to serve in the military. These are not small matters in our world. This debate dominates our news and politics like no other time in my life. What does God say about it?

Let's remember how we got here. A rejection of God is a rejection of God's purposes for us. We live as functional atheists in a material world. Without God, all definitions are self-determined including what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. But it goes deeper than that. The week after Easter we have one whole message entitled, Sex –

² Robert H. Mounce, *The New American Commentary: Romans*, p. 81.

³ C.S. Lewis as quoted by F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans*, p. 80.

It's About More Than You Think. Here we see one way—God has a purpose for gender, marriage, and sex. What is it?

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24) Notice that God's plan includes biological gender. A man leaves his father and mother. For the father and mother to be such, they were a man and woman who biologically reproduced. The man unites to a wife. So there is heterosexual marriage as God's plan. But it goes further. They shall become one flesh. A man unites with a woman in marriage, and then they become one flesh. That oneness is more than sexual, but it certainly includes it. In one verse we have so much. Gender based on biology. Heterosexual marriage. Sex that is reserved for heterosexual marriage. This is God's plan. This is the natural order. This is orthodox Christian teaching that dates back to the very beginning.

In the Bible story, we come to Genesis 19 and we have the first mention of rejection of God's plan for heterosexual sex with an entire society of cities consumed with homosexual sex. They were so consumed with it that when God's angels in human form visit Lot's house in Sodom, every male in town is pawing at the door wanting to have sex with the angelic men. Homosexuality was already on the scene and continues in the story by being found in commands of God against it.

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Leviticus 18:22)

In spite of what some people try to say, there is no statement about homosexuality in Scripture that is positive. Certainly not here in Romans 1. Paul describes it as "dishonorable passion" and includes in this both male homosexuality and lesbian sexuality. Both he says are "contrary to nature."

You may think, *why is he picking on homosexuality?* Realize he ends the chapter with 21 sins that also indicate man's rejection of God. So why shine the light on homosexuality? It's not because it is a worse sin than adultery or lying. Commentators make the point that homosexuality is perhaps the sin that is the easiest to see how it is contrary to God's design.

This is mostly biology and plumbing. Human beings were made heterosexual. Our body parts fit sexually with the gender opposite of us. Basic engineering. Homosexual expression requires overcoming biological engineering. Or you could say, it goes against how God made the parts to work.

Like all sin, homosexuality is a rejection of God's purpose and plan. The Bible is not homophobic any more than it is phobic about any sin because all of it falls short of God's glory, design, and purpose for us.

How should we view homosexuality? The same way we view any sin—through a grid of the Fall, the cross, God's grace, and forgiveness. The church has historically failed to do this by making too much of homosexuality like it is the unpardonable sin. I fear that currently the opposite danger lurks as cultural expectations and political correctness pressure the church to be accepting and affirming.

Many churches describe their position in a way that I like and would recommend we use. With respect to homosexuality, we are **welcoming but not affirming**. Here's what's good about it. We can say that about any sin or sinner. We are not picking on anyone or any sin. You are welcome here, but we are not going to affirm that lifestyle or normalize it. We are

very hopeful to see it redeemed by God's grace and for God's purpose to become true in your life.

When I was in college I remember the pastor of the large church I attended began a ministry to AIDS victims in the local hospital. This was early in the AIDS epidemic and it was often terminal. He told the hospital, *anyone with AIDS willing to let me come, I'll come and see them*. He did. Word got out in the homosexual community: this local pastor cares about us.

I was in the service one Sunday when he read a sharply critical letter he received. I think it was anonymous, but he read it to the congregation. It basically said, *Pastor, if you keep this up we may have homosexuals in our church*. I remember him looking at the congregation with fire in his eyes and saying, *Yes, we will have homosexuals in our church and they can come and sit down with all the liars, cheats, and adulterers we already have here*.

Are homosexuals welcome here? Yes. Adulterers? Yes. Cheats? Yes. We are not going to affirm any of those lifestyles as morally right, but we will seek to love, care, and meet people in the mess of their lives and point them to a Savior who died for all our sins. Amen?

Here is the third, God gave them up.

"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." (Romans 1:28-32)

People try to categorize this list, but the point seems to be the accumulating effect of depravity. It's not like things are kind of bad, they are really bad. Every one of these items is in every day's news. They feel almost normal to us, but all of them are us suffering our refusal to acknowledge God. He ends with not only do we do these but we have no shame actually cheering other people in their sin. This is spring break in Daytona Beach. Masses of people sinning and cheering sin. This is entertainment which seeps moral garbage into our homes via media. We are no longer shocked by anything. We are desensitized to sin.

We traded God's glory for this moral cesspool? Who would do it? Only foolish and absolutely absurd thinking would give up God's favor, blessing, and glory forever for this.

The chapter is intentionally sorrowful. I'd like to not end the message on that note. How about this note?

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

This is a similar list to the one in Romans. How is this encouraging? The next verse Paul writes, *"And such were some of you."* (1 Corinthians 6:11)

Were. You were this, but now you are forgiven. We have in this room every sin listed. But we have found forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. We are great sinners, but Christ is a great Savior. If you are stuck in sin and sin's consequences, we've been there, done that. God is wrath but God is also love and grace and will redeem your life to true freedom if you respond in faith in Jesus and follow him.

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