Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Reasons for the Wrath of God, Part 4
Scripture: Romans 1:23
Code: 45-13

Our study tonight takes us back to the 1st chapter of Romans, Romans chapter 1. In recent months, we have begun a study of this marvelous epistle of Paul to the church at Rome in which he presents the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we're looking now at verses 19-23. Tonight we're going to sum up our examination of these verses.

Let me read the text to you beginning in verse 18. And here Paul really begins the main body of his letter.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

"Because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things."

Now, we've titled this section "Reasons for the Wrath of God." God's wrath revealed in verse 18 and the rationale for it in verses 19 through 23. We've been giving you four points, or four reasons for the wrath of God. And the last one that we're going to be looking at tonight is religion. And we'll get to that in a moment.

You might be interested to note that the Hindus, for example, have some 330 million gods. Which amounts to about 8 per family. Four hundred and fifty million Hindus have 75 million cows to worship. In Thailand there are 20,000 Buddhist temples, 1 for each baptized Christian.

And, in fact, a 2-inch-long discolored tooth is reverenced by 400 million Buddhists as the most sacred object on the earth. And they claim that it is a tooth rescued from the funeral pyre of Buddha in 543 B.C., his tooth. They have set it in a golden lotus blossom in a temple called "The Temple of the Tooth" in Kandy, Ceylon. They've surrounded it with rubies. They surround it with myriads of flowers. And people come from many countries to worship it bringing gifts of gold, silver, and jewels.

The Buddhists believe their Buddhas are really living gods. In fact, in Foochow, China, 1 of 15 wooden Buddhas on a temple shelf accidentally fell over on a man and killed him. His family demanded a court trial accusing Buddha of murder. He was found guilty and so were the 14 other Buddhas on the shelf, and they beheaded all of them. They really believe those are real beings, their gods.

Some of the relics of apostate Christianity differ little from this. For example, the Roman church claims to have the hair of the Virgin Mary. And they have several locks of it, one in a church in Naples, another in a church in Rome. They also say that in the Cathedral Perugia is her wedding ring. They have her holy girdle at the church in Prato. Drops of the virgin's milk are kept in the church of San Guadioso e Patrizio at Naples and St. Mary of the People at Rome.

The holy basin used at the Last Supper is supposedly kept in the cathedral of St. Lorenzo in Genoa. The lance which pierced Jesus' side and Veronica's veil with Christ's features imprinted and the head of St. Andrew are all kept in the four massive piers which support St. Peter's dome in Rome.

Christ's burial sheet is supposed to be the Shroud at Turin and it doesn't seem to bother anybody that it says He was wrapped in one sheet cloth and His head was wrapped in a napkin, separate from that which sat in the place by itself. The rectangular marble stone with Christ's footprints is kept in the church of St. Sebastian in Rome. And they have 3 shoulder blades, 4 legs, 5 arms, 50 index fingers, all belonging to John the Baptist. And all 50 of those index fingers are the actual fingers that pointed and said, "Behold the Lamb of God."

We live in a very religious world. Lots of religions. Even in our own society, young people flock into cults. They identify with religious groups. At least 2.6 billion people in the world have an identifiable religious affiliation. That's over half the population. They say 1.7 billion people in the world have an unidentified religion. The pollsters, then, and the people who count people determine that if they don't know what your religion is they assume you have one, they just say your religion is unidentified.

Man is religious. Now, is all of this religion man really seeking God? Is that what it is? Is it man struggling through his primitive confusion and the chaos of his world, struggling past the traditions and the errors of his past forefathers? Is man really struggling trying to find his way through all of this stuff to get to the true God? Is this man on the way up?

Is this man ascending through animism and polydemonism and polytheism finally to monotheism or one God and finally to the true God? Is man really on the road up? Should we pat men on the back and say, "We commend you for your pursuit of God? We honor you for seeking."

Is man then to be pitied because he’s working so hard and he just can’t seem to come up with the truth that is not readily available to him for one reason or another? Is he just trying to get God in focus and he's doing everything he can to focus the lens but God's just out of focus, and he’s given it his best shot? Liberal theologians would want us to believe that.

And if God then sends that man to hell, who is trying so hard to get the thing in focus, isn’t God unfair? After all, man is religious. He’s given it his best shot.

Well, liberals would also tell us there’s no hell. But this isn’t what Paul tells us in Romans 1. Paul tells us that man does not ascend to religion, he descends to religion. And that’s the message of Romans 1:19-23. Man is to be pitied, not because of a lack of opportunity, not because there’s no way he can get his focus clear, not because God is unfair, but man is to be pitied because he refuses the truth.

And having refused the truth at the highest level, he descends to the pit of religion. Man did not ascend out of the muck of paganism to discover God. He left the knowledge of God and went down into the muck of paganism. Religion is not man’s ascent. Religion is man’s descent.

Now this is a critical passage because you have to see the justice of God all bound up in this. And that’s why it begins in verse 18, by saying “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” In other words, God is angry with men. And God demands that they face the consequence of their sin. And the reason he has a right to be angry flows out of what Paul says at the end of verse 18, Men hold the truth, but they abandon it.

Verse 19 says “That which may be known of God is manifest in them.” But they leave that. And verse 21 says, “When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God.” And verse 23 says, “And they changed the glory of the truly incorruptible God into their idols.” This is the descent of man.

Now, we’ve been saying all along that as Paul opens the gospel, he starts with the bad news. You have to have the bad news before the good news. First the danger, then the deliverer. First the judgment, then the way of escape. First the condemnation, and then the forgiveness. First the guilt, and then the grace.

The whole message of forgiveness, the whole message of redeeming grace, the whole message of the love of God, the whole message of the death of Christ on the cross on your behalf and mine is based upon the fact that we understand that man is truly, honestly guilty before God of abandoning the truth of God. And Paul makes this his message by the way, beginning in 1:18 and running all the way to 3:20. A good portion of chapter 1, all of chapter 2, and a good portion of chapter 3 all deal with the fact that man is guilty before God. He is a sinner.

So, God's indignant hatred of sin is continuously being revealed from heaven against ungodly men because they have the truth but they descend from it into the pit of religion. Which, by the way, is the ultimate blasphemy because it substitutes a false god for the true God.

One writer said, "God's righteous anger never rises and never abates. It is always at flood tide in the presence of sin because He is unchangeably and inflexibly holy."

And so God is continually revealing His wrath against sin. In fact, in Psalm 7:11 is this interesting statement. "God is angry every day." God is angry every day. Continually against sin.

You say, "Well, does God have a right to be angry?" Of course. Indifference to sin would be a moral blemish. "He who does not hate sin is a moral leper," said Arthur Pink, and he's right. How could one who delights only in what is pure and lovely not loathe what is impure and ugly? How could He who is infinitely holy disregard sin that violates that utter holiness? How could He who loves that which righteousness manifests not hate and act severely toward unrighteousness? And how could He who is the sum of all excellency look with satisfaction upon virtue and vice equally?

He couldn't and He can't because He's holy and just and good. He hates sin. And He has a right to react because man is guilty. Man has turned his back on available knowledge of God, and we've been seeing that as we've been flowing through these verses. The wrath of God is simply the proper reaction of holiness to unholiness.

And Paul wants us to know that before we can understand the grace of God we have to understand the wrath of God. Before we can understand the meaning of the death of Christ, and before we can understand how loving God is, and how forgiving He is, and how gracious He is, and how merciful He is, we have to understand how guilty and undeserving we are.

His wrath, by the way, is no less a divine perfection than His love or His holiness. It's just as much an element of His perfection as anything else. It is a divine perfection. In Psalm 95:11 for example, it says, "Unto whom I sware in My wrath." God says certain things in His wrath. He swears in His wrath that He'll do certain things.

Now there are two occasions of God's swearing in the Old Testament. Two times when God swears to do something. One is when He makes a promise, and that would be such as Genesis 22:16, or any other time God says He swears and makes a promise, it means He'll bring it to pass. The other time that God swears is in denouncing and calling for judgment, such as Deuteronomy 1:34, and you can look those up as examples.

We know that God swears in mercy to His children. And sometimes He swears to terrify the wicked. God will as surely bring wrath on the wicked as He will bring His mercy on the just. He swears to do

both and we must understand that. God is perfectly angry as He is perfectly loving because men are guilty.

Now, there are four reasons why God's anger is justified. Reason number one, let's look back and be reminded, is revelation. And what I mean by that is men have been given the truth, verse 19, "That which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them." How did He do that? Verse 20, "Through the invisible things of Him being displayed in the creation of the world - " they are understood by the things that are made " - even His eternal power and Godhead." You can know of His supernatural nature and His great power by just looking at creation.

I read this week the statement of a scientist, he said, "The phenomena of nature reveal the two qualities of force and intelligence working in perfect harmony."

You have to see force and you have to see a tremendous intelligence. And that is what Paul is saying. You can see His eternal power and you can see His Godhead, His infinite supernatural intelligence and wisdom just by looking at the world around you.

Now, God is manifest in creation so that man is without excuse. And we've been trying to show you that if man would live up to the light that he sees in creation, God would reveal the rest of the truths to him. But man turns his back at that point. If he would follow the light that God gives, God, I believe, would give him more light. And God would give him the message of Christ.

The Lord wants every man to know Christ. That's why it says in John 1:9 that Christ is "the light that comes into the world and lights every man." God wants men to know Christ, and wherever He finds an eager willing heart He'll bring the message of Christ some way to that heart. But men don't even live up to the light they have.

And that takes us to the second point, rejection. In verse 21, we learn that men have turned away from the truth. "Because when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." Now when they knew God, they turned their back on God. And there's a very simple reason why, it's indicated to us in John 3:20, I believe. They didn't come to the light because they were afraid their deeds would be what? Exposed.

Men see God, and they see the truth of God, and they run because they don't want to be exposed. That's the basis of it. They are not willing to come to the light "lest their deeds should be reproved," lest they should be unmasked, lest the rock under which they hide should be lifted up and everyone know the truth. And so they reject God.

Daniel's indictment, by the way, of Belshazzar in Daniel 5:23 is true of many people. It says this, and I think it's a great statement. "The Lord in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." "The Lord in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." You reject a very God who is your life. And when man does this, when he rejects revelation and he turns his back on God, he greases the slide, and he slides further away from God. And he falls, it says in verse 21, into "vain imaginations" or vain reasonings. And we talked about that last time, meaning human philosophy.

Now I want to make something very clear. I'm not totally against all human logic. I'm not against all human reasoning. Every once in a while, man has intersected with the truth, no question about it. But when I talk about philosophy, I'm talking about it the way Paul does in Colossians 2:8. I'm talking about the vain reasonings that he talks about here.

And what we mean is useless philosophy, empty reasoning, that is devoid of God. When God reveals Himself and man rejects, then man slides down from God into his own philosophy, his own reasoning, his own imagination, his own speculations of science, falsely so-called. And man's perception of truth becomes hopeless and clouded, confused and uncertain. His heart is plunged then, at the end of verse 21, into total darkness. The light is out. He starts with light, and you can see this, you can see this. The way you can see this is by watching a little child. They respond to the message.

This noon we had lunch with a couple from Florida. And the man said that he had gone home to his family when he was saved and he got them all together, and he has seven brothers and sisters. And he stood up and told all of them about Jesus Christ, and they tore him to ribbons, and they mocked him, and they laughed at him, and he said they're all into the Harvard thing and the MIT thing up in Boston.

And they all fancy themselves as intellectuals. And he got all done with the whole thing, and he had two little sisters, and they stood up with tears after his whole presentation. And they said to the rest of the family, "Can't you see that what he's telling us about Jesus is really true?" Where'd they get that? You never met an eight-year-old atheist. They don't have any problem with that. That which may be known of God is visible to them. There's a heart of belief. That's why Jesus said, "Except you become as a little - " what? " - child, you don't enter the kingdom." And then when they get older, and they get sophisticated, and they have to call their own shots, they turn their back on God.

And so, they become dark. First of all, it's vain empty reason and into the vacuum of vanity and emptiness plunges darkness, and the lights go out. And that's why when the apostle Paul set about to minister, the definition of his ministry is thus. I was sent to the Gentiles, Acts 26:18, "to open their eyes, and turn them from darkness to - " what? " - to light." Why? Because they're in darkness. Their evil heart is darkened. Their foolish heart is darkened. And we said last time that that is both intellectual darkness and moral darkness. And we see that throughout Scripture, that darkness can

refer to the intellect or to the morality of an individual.

So, man descends from knowing God, rejecting God, failing to glorify and thank God. He then is left with his own human reasoning, and it plunges him into utter blackness, and he is totally unable to discern what is right, what is wrong, what is true, what is a lie. He's lost.

And by the way, he is descended so far from God, of course, into his pit of darkness that there's no ability in him to restrain evil. That's why as countries and nations and people move away from God, they move into immorality and amorality because there are no restraints in human philosophy, ultimately.

And that leads us to the third step, rationalization. Remember that from last time, verse 22? "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools." Men have heard the truth, rejected the truth, and now they affirm that their darkness is the truth. And they stand up and say, "We know the truth." And that tells me that they've lost touch with reality. They have totally lost touch with reality. They no longer know what truth is. Like Pilate said to Jesus, "What is truth?" Who knows what that is? That is the character of lost man. He's utterly unable to ascertain what is true. Doesn't know.

In 2 Timothy 3:13 you get the picture here. "Evil men and seducers - " listen " - shall become worse and worse, - " listen to this " - deceiving, and being deceived." That is characteristic of human philosophy. They deceive others because they are totally and utterly self-deceived. They do not know the truth.

In Titus 3:3, "We ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived." It is characteristic of unregenerate man that he's deceived, doesn't know the truth, can't know it, he's in absolute blackness. But you know what he'll do inevitably? He'll stand there and rationalize that he knows the truth, and he'll spew out all of these supposed answers.

An interesting statement made by Isaiah the prophet in 47:10, he says, "Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thy heart, I am, and none else beside me." Isn't that interesting? You're so perverted by what you think you know that you've decided nobody knows anything but you. You've got all the answers. What an illusion.

That was the illusion by which Lucifer fell, incidentally. Thought he had all the answers. He thought wisdom resided with him. He looked at himself and saw the majesty and the beauty of his person as created by God and it went to his head. He thought he would be superior to God. What an illusion.

So God has the right to judge man because man rejects Him in the darkness of his twisted and perverted mind. And then stupidly affirms that he's wise. His fantasy carrying him into that deception. But you know something? Even in the midst of his human philosophy and in the midst of his

befuddled mind, in the blackness of his heart, he has a residual knowledge that there must be God.

Have you ever noticed that? It's true. Even though he wants to be a philosopher, he wants to have it all reside with him, ultimately he is a religious being, and he can't deny that. And so we come to the fourth in the four reasons for God's wrath, the fourth step in the descent of man, religion. From revelation, to rejection, to rationalization, to religion in verse 23, because he cries out for a god.

He's got to have a god. There's the pulling of the supernatural dimension on his nature. He must worship. He has to bow someplace. Just as he breathes air, he must worship somewhere, and he will. Even in the midst of his philosophy, he's got to have some God. And if he will not have the true God, he will invent a god that he can live with.

And verse 23 tells us so. "He changes the glory of the incorruptible God into - " an idol, or " - an image like corruptible man, and birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things."

Voltaire once said, "God made man in His own image and man returned the favor." And that's true. He falls all the way to the pit, and he does the worst thing that a human being can do. He gets religious, the worst blasphemy against God, religion apart from the true God.

Want me to show you how I know that? Go back to Exodus chapter 20, Exodus chapter 20. Now here God lays down the rules, the standards. This is the Decalogue, the ten commandments. Verse 1. "And God spoke all these words, saying, - " here comes God's priority standards. "I am the Lord thy God, who have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Here comes rule number one. "Thou shalt have no other - " what? " - gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me."

Rule number one, no other gods. Rule number two, no idols of any shape or form. That is the highest standard. It is summed up in the statement of our Lord. "This is the great commandment, Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind and strength." In other words, utterly committed to the true God, no place for any other god. When men get religious apart from the true God, they have violated God's standard at its very beginning point. It is the most blasphemous thing they can do.

A man purchased a statue of Christ and put it on his desk. A few days later his wife moved it into the living room. A few days later it appeared in the dining room prompting a little child to say, "Just where are you going to put God?" And maybe that's the question that God wants every man to ask. Where are you going to put God? He demands first place. This command says there's only one place where God will be put, and that is first, and there will be no other gods, and there will be no idols or images

of any kind. And this is precisely what man has violated. He has broken God's commandments at the very start, blaspheming God.

So, man is inexcusable. There's a good illustration of this, I think, in 2 Kings 17, and you can see that even Israel did this. Israel followed this flow. In 2 Kings 17:15, just listen for a minute, it says about them this. Verse 14 says, "They did not believe in the Lord their God." So, that was the first thing. God had revealed Himself to them, but they rejected. "They did not believe in the Lord their God. They rejected His statutes, and His covenant that He made with their fathers, His testimonies which He testified against them; they followed vanity." There they go. As soon as they reject God they slide into emptiness. "And they became vain." Sounds exactly like Romans 1. This is what Israel did.

"And they went after the nations who were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them, that they should not do like them. And they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them - " what? " - melted images, two calves and an idol and worshipped all the stars in the heaven and served Baal." It's incredible, incredible. And God got so angry He removed everybody but the tribe of Judah only, says verse 18.

What did they do?. They didn't want to believe in God, so they descended from there into emptiness, and from emptiness into idolatry, and from idolatry into moral perversion. At the end of verse 17, "they sold themselves to do evil," and into judgment.

Look with me for a moment at Daniel chapter 5, and let's see this same truth illustrated for a moment. This is most fascinating. Daniel 5:17. Belshazzar the king made a big feast, you know, and this is the handwriting on the wall chapter. Verse 17. "Daniel answered and said to the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation." I don't want a thing from you but I'll tell you what it says, anyway.

"O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honor: And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down." In other words, he says, "You should have looked backwards and seen Nebuchadnezzar your father, and how it was with him. God gave him all these things: Absolute sovereignty - verse 19 - utter sovereignty.

Verse 20. "When his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: and they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; - " in other words, he became a raving maniac " - till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointed it over whomsoever he will. And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart - " now listen

to this line “ - though thou knewest all this.”

Now there’s the first principle again. Belshazzar sinned against knowledge. All men do. It should have been clear to him from what he saw in the case of Nebuchadnezzar. His sin was not in ignorance. His pride and his boasting and his rejection of God was without excuse because he should have seen it.

The end of verse 22 indicts him. “You knew all this.” He sinned against light. And in the midst of light, he blasphemed God. Verse 23. “But thou hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, and thy wives, thy concubines, have drunk wine from them; and praised the gods of silver, and gold, and bronze, and iron, wood and stone - ” and so forth. What did they do? They went into the temple and took the sacred vessels and they got drunk off of them, and used them to make toasts to idols. So, he started by sinning against knowledge, and secondly he blasphemed God.

And thirdly, he was idolatrous. He worshipped the gods of bronze, and iron, and silver, and gold, and wood, and stone, which don’t see and don’t hear and don’t know. “And the God - ” here we are at our verse “ - in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified.”

And then, of course, he became a vile, reprobate man. The implication all in that verse: The wives, concubines, drunkenness. The result is in verse 24. “Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and the writing was written. And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.” And what does it mean? “MENE; God hath numbered the kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided.” In other words, it’s all over for you, fella. Verse 30. “In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being threescore and two years old.” It was the end.

Now what do you have here? A man knew the truth, turned his back on the truth, blasphemed God. But because man is religious by nature he made gods of his own, worshiped them, descended in a reprobate, evil, vile living patterns, and experienced the wrath of God. That’s the same flow that you see in Romans 1. Now let’s go back to Romans 1. Basically the same thing.

Whether you’re looking at Israel and their descent, whether you’re looking at Belshazzar and his, this is the chronicle of how it is with men. I’ll say it again, people, and I want you to remember it. Man is not religious because he is ascending to try to find God. He is religious because he is running blasphemously away from God into the pit of idolatry. All false religion is idolatry. And A. W. Tozer was right when he said, “Idolatry begins in the mind when we pervert or exchange the idea of God for something other than what He really is.”

Now I want to say something about this that I think is important in the light of liberalism and contemporary theology. The descent of man into idolatry is definitely a descent. History shows that. The liberals and others who try to tell us that man started in idolatry, started in primitive animism, or totemism, worshiping animals and totems and things, that he's moving upward. That just can't be verified historically. It cannot be verified whatsoever historically.

They say man started in animism, started worshiping animals; and then he moved up to polydemonism, he started worshipping many demons; and then he worked his way up to polytheism, and he worshipped many gods; and then he worked his way up to monotheism, one God; and that's how he got where he was going. That's what the liberals tell us. And that's why they don't believe Moses wrote the Pentateuch, and they don't believe Moses really knew the ten commandments in his era, because they believed at the time that Moses lived man was still mussing around in animism, and totemism,and polydemonism, therefore the Pentateuch is a forgery, actually written way later and foisted on us as if it were old. That is typical liberal theology.

The Encyclopedia Britannica takes this view, and I checked it this week. And this is what - you want to hear a confusing paragraph? Listen to this. "In an age when the study of religion was practically confined to Judaism and Christianity, idolatry was regarded as a degeneration from an uncorrupt primeval faith." That's what they say the Christians and the Jews believed. "But the comparative and historical investigation of religion has shown it to be rather a stage in an upward movement." In other words, they're saying the Jews and the Christians believed that man started out with a primeval faith and descended into idolatry. But history tells us that he started there and he's working his way up.

Then the very next paragraph, it says this. "According to Varro, the Romans had no animal or human image of a god for 170 years after the founding of Rome. Herodotus says that the Persians had no temples or idols before Artaxerxes I. Lucian bears similar testimony for Greece, and as to idols for Egypt, as well. Eusebius sums up the whole theory of antiquity when he says, 'The oldest people had no idols at all.' "

Well, that paragraph contradicts the other paragraph. And then the next paragraph makes it worse. "Images of the gods indeed presuppose a definiteness of conception, and powers of discrimination that could only be the result of history and reflection."

You know what that is? Blah, blah, blah. They say it is evident that man is really ascended, but all these people they quote say there was no idolatry in the past. And the proof is by their own statement that man descended for 170 years after the founding of Rome, there were no idols, there were no images. You see, that's the way it goes. Man starts out with faith and descends from that.

Scripture affirms this. It says, for example, before the flood there was no such thing as idolatry at all. The world was not drowned because there was idolatry. It was drowned because there was

unrighteousness. There was no idolatry. It says in Genesis 4:26 men in that age quote “called upon the name of the Lord.” They worshiped God. Man didn’t grow up out of idolatry to know the true God. He descended into that. Very important.

So, the world’s idolatry, the world’s religion is a falling, not a rising. Therefore, Paul says, “Man is guilty. Man deserves judgment.” And the ultimate insanity of man is that he rejects God and then invents a non-god, made in his own image, on his own terms, worships that non-god, and then calls himself wise.

Even the Latin poet Horace laughed at the stupidity of idolatry. He wrote this, “I was a fig tree’s trunk, a useless log. The workmen wavered, ‘Shall I make a stool or a god?’ They chose to make a god, and thus a god I am.” Ridiculous.

In the apocrypha it says, “An experienced woodcutter will cut down a tree that’s easy to handle. Skillfully he strips off all its bark. And then with pleasing workmanship, he makes a useful article that serves life’s needs. But he takes a castoff piece, one that is good for nothing, a stick crooked and full of knots, carves it with care, and causes it to resemble a man. Or he makes it to look like some worthless animal, giving it a coat of red paint, and with paint covering every blemish. And then he makes for it a suitable niche, sets it in the wall, and fastens it with iron. Takes care that it doesn’t fall because he knows that it can’t help itself, for it’s only an image and in need of help. And then he prays to it about his marriage and his children. And for health, he appeals to a thing that is weak. For life, he prays to a thing that is dead. For aid, he entreats an object that is thoroughly inexperienced, and he asks strength of a thing whose hands have no strength.”

Now, that was the writing of the ancients at the time. They all thought it was really foolish, and yet they were trapped in the rejection of God with little other alternatives.

In Isaiah 44:6, just a couple of thoughts here. Try to edit a few things so we don’t get too deep in this. “Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am first, and I am the last; and apart from Me there is no God.” That’s pretty clear isn’t it? No God. “And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set in order for Me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming, and shall come, let them show unto them.”

In other words, who is going to call the shots in history? Who is going to do the creating but Me? “Fear not, neither be afraid: have I not told thee from that time, and declared it? ye are even My witnesses. Is there a God beside Me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.” God says, “I don’t know any.”

“They that make a carved image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed. Who hath formed a

god, or melted and cast an image that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his fellows shall be ashamed: and the workmen, they are of men: let them all be gathered together, let them stand up; yet they shall fear, and shall be ashamed together."

In other words, it's so stupid that if they all brought their gods in and stuck them in a pile they'd sort of feel silly. And He goes on to say how they make it, and they cut down trees, and they work with the fire, and the metal, and they carve it, and they do all this. And when they get all done, they've got something that can't see, can't hear, doesn't understand a thing, can't think. And then He says to His people, "Get your head together. Why would you worship that stuff?"

Well, you see, when man rejects God, and worships himself, he invariably has to make a god of his own creation. And I would hasten to add that basically - and I want you to note this in your mind - all idolatry is self-worship, all of it is, in one sense. In another sense it's Satan worship, or demon worship. We'll see that in a minute. But in one sense it's self worship, because ultimately man winds up worshiping himself because he invents deities like himself.

In Isaiah 2:8 it says, "They worshipped the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made." They're actually worshiping the creation that they have created, which, in effect, is worshiping themselves.

By the way, the epitome of that comes with antichrist who sits in the temple of God, telling himself that he is what? God, 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4. Antichrist "sits in the temple of God, telling himself that he is God."

So, man is idolatrous. And his idolatry ultimately, even though he will not admit it, is the worship of self. He rejects the true God. He affirms in his own mind that he is wise, therefore he will call the shots, he will determine what is true, and in the residual feeling that there must be a God, he creates one out of his own mind that is the product of his own thinking, and he worships that god, and in effect worships himself. This, believe me, is the ultimate damnable heresy of which Paul wrote to Timothy.

But look now at verse 23. The essence of it is that he changes the glory - or "exchange" is a better way to say that - he exchanges "the glory of the incorruptible God" for an idol. I mean, it's incredible that the incorruptible, eternal, divine nature of God would be exchanged for a stick or a stone or some kind of a crafted image. But that's what they do.

And may I hasten to add that when men do this, in effect, they wind up worshiping the devil himself. Just to show you that, 1 Corinthians 10 is a key verse. It says in 10:20, 1 Corinthians 10:20, just listen to this. "The things which the Gentiles sacrifice - " get this now. In other words, the world of religion does its sacrificial stuff, and he talks in verse 19 about the idols that they worship. The idol is nothing,

he says, and so forth. But the idols “to which the Gentiles sacrifice - ” the things they sacrifice “ - They sacrifice to demons.” Did you get that? Why? Because, if you want to worship a stick, a demon will impersonate the god you think is in the stick, and do enough stuff to keep you working on the stick.

You know, I asked myself that question so many times. How can people worship a rock? How can they do that? Pretty soon you say, “This rock never does anything.” I mean, I pray to the rock and nothing happens. And maybe he’s been worshiping the same rock that 20 generations have been worshiping, and you wonder how they can all get hung on this rock. Basically, if you worship the god you think is in the rock, I believe a demon will impersonate the god you think is in the rock, and do enough supernatural stuff, and enough phenomena will happen to keep people stuck on that rock. I believe if people want to worship the stars in astrology, that Satan will make enough of that stuff come to pass within his power to keep people hooked on that stuff.

So, first of all, it is self worship. And secondly, it is Satan worship. Any religion but a true one - and the only true one is the worship of God through Christ - any other thing - people say, “Oh, you shouldn’t say anything about false, other religions. You shouldn’t do that.” Listen, that’s the pit. That’s blasphemy.

There’s only one way to God, and that’s through the Lord Jesus Christ. There’s only one God. Anything else is self worship and Satan worship all thrown into one ball. And the world of religious people are worshiping themselves, and they know that, I think, but they’re worshiping the devil and probably don’t know that.

Now let’s look at the idols they make. We’ll start at the end and move back. “Creeping things.” Do you know people through the centuries have worshiped bugs? That’s right, bugs, beetles. You go in Egypt, and everywhere you go they tell you they worship these little beetles, scarab beetles. They were really big on those beetles. In fact, I brought home a couple of little beetles as illustrations of their worship. The creeping things could be bugs, and beetles, and snakes, anything from a snake to a fly.

You say, “Do people worship flies?” Of course, “Beelzebub” means the “lord of the flies.” That’s right, they worship flies. The Philistines worship flies. The Assyrians worship snakes.

In the temple of Actium, the Greeks used to sacrifice an ox to the god of the flies. Pliny tells us that at Rome, sacrifices were offered to flies that flew around the temple of Hercules. The Syrians undoubtedly offered sacrifices to flies. And it is said that no fly ever dared enter Solomon’s temple. I question that. Today, Hindus won’t kill flies because they’re afraid they might violate some deity that’s working on someone who for one life has to be a fly. Snakes figure in many, many religions as gods.

And then, men not only worships that kind of stuff but he worships four-footed beasts. Now, even the Jews worshiped the golden calf, did they not? Not only did they do that in Exodus 32 at Sinai, but they set up a couple of golden calves in 1 Kings 12 at Dan and Bethel, and worshiped them again.

The Egyptians worshiped bulls. I'll never forget when I was in Egypt. They took us out, and we got on horses, and rode to the pyramids. And these little Arab boys would pull the horses along. And they only knew two English words, you know, "dollars" and "Lone Ranger." Oh yeah, they knew "John Wayne," too. "Lone Ranger," "John Wayne" and "dollars." And we would ride out there, and we took another little horse ride, and we went out to this burial ground, absolutely exquisite, they've uncovered it in the sand out there.

And we went in and there were these massive sarcophagus arrangements with huge caskets that have been uncovered in the ground. And they told us that in these were buried sacred bulls, huge bulls. And they would lower them through the ground and then pile the sand, and there were these chambers with all this painting on the walls and all the riches, everything, fortunes were literally stashed in those places where they buried the Egyptian bulls.

The Greeks worship Diana of the Ephesians. And when you think of Diana, you probably think of some svelte girl in a white gown. Diana of the Ephesians was a black beast, an ugly gross black beast that had all of the hangings under it like fourteen cows would have, altogether on one beast, to suckle the world, gross thing. That's Diana.

Throughout history they have worshiped sacred cows, and mice, and rats, and elephants. Did you know that in Egypt there was Sobek, the crocodile god? There was Anubis, who was half man with a head of a jackal. The two chief Egyptian deities were Osiris and Isis, and they were the sun and the moon. They worshiped the sun and the moon. By the way, Paul doesn't cover every possible thing. They worshiped the stars, the sun, the moon, they've worshiped everything there is: Rocks, trees, everything. This is just a sample.

The Egyptians worshiped the stork. They worshiped the ape. They worshiped the cat. They worshiped the hawk. And they worshiped at least 20,000 other animals. Thebes worshiped a ram. Memphis worshiped an ox called Apis, Bubastis a cat, Momemphis a cow, the Mendesians a he-goat. The Hermopolitans worshiped a fish, and the Paprimas of that time, which is an Egyptian area, worshiped a hippopotamus. The Lycopolitans worshiped a wolf. And it goes on and on and on. Snakes - some of them even worshiped crocodile eggs.

Then it says in verse 23, moving up again, "birds." The Romans worshiped the eagle. They made an idol out of eagles. Herod the Great had a golden eagle erected over the gate of Jerusalem, and infuriated the Jews. The soldiers of Rome had eagles on their standards. And the Jews recognized them as idols forbidden by the divine law, and tried to tear them down and caused all kinds of

problems.

Indians have worshiped birds and they put them on their totems as thunderbirds. The men who built the Pyramids worshiped, among other things, some kinds of birds. They worshiped insects, they worshiped animals. It just goes on and on, and I could just keep going. The cultured men of Rome, for example, made their plans by studying the entrails of sheep or the flight of the birds, much like astrology.

So, man has put the most preposterous things in the place of God. And then ultimately, it says in verse 23, the first thing he has “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image made like corruptible man.” Man is sort of the highest level, the most sophisticated level of worship.

They worshiped Caesar. They put his face on all the coins. The gods of the Greeks and the gods of the Romans were pretty much man-like created gods. The gods of Mesopotamia, by the way, numbered some 1500. They had gods of war, gods of fertility, gods of learning, gods of hunting, gods of heaven, earth, fire, air, water, and on, and on, and on. And very often they were in the form of some imagined man or man-like creature.

And throughout the centuries men have prostrated themselves before forms of other men. People today even, in the Roman Church, still prostrate themselves before idols of dead men. They may not say it’s worship, but that’s the way it comes out for many of them.

In Psalm 115:4, “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They who make them are like them.” They don’t know anymore than those dumb idols. That’s what the Psalmist says.

The chief gods very often were in human form. Man is idolatrous. You say, “Well, John, how does this relate to today? In America we don’t have - ” We have some of this, I suppose. Probably some weird people out somewhere worshiping just about everything there is. But we have other gods, somewhat more sophisticated, I suppose, today.

We worship science. We worship communism, secularism, humanism, nationalism, naturalism, ecology. We worship money, pleasure, sex, romance, entertainment, sports, education, prestige, power, rock singers, movie stars, great athletes. Man is idolatrous. Now these are only part of his worship. Somewhere down the line he’s got a belief in a God and he’ll create some god of his own reasoning.

So, the end result - and I think you get the picture - is religion. Man descends. I think it's been uniquely illustrated in a recent phenomena that I told you last week, I mentioned to you, called Dungeons & Dragons. Dungeons & Dragons is a new game. Three million Americans currently play this new game. And I thought I'd just read to you some of what it says and what it's all about.

Dungeons & Dragons is a fantasy game. Instead of the historical background of the war games popular in the late 1950s, Dungeons & Dragons games are fought in the minds of the players as the dungeon master sets the stage in a fantasy world. New games are being created, more sophisticated and more cruel than the original Dungeons & Dragons. These are called fantasy role playing games, and among the most well-known are RuneQuest, Chivalry & Sorcery, Arduin Grimoire, Tunnels & Trolls, and it goes on, and on, and on.

Here's the game. One person gets to be the dungeon master and he plays the role of the quote "supreme god" in the world. He creates a world for his players. His tools are maps, dice, miniature figures, rule books, and so forth. And a game can last for several years. And the players will play through those years for hours, and hours, and hours.

What is the ultimate fantasy of man? The ultimate fantasy of man is that man should be God. This speaks of that fantasy. When a game starts, each player is given a created personality, by which he enters into the game. You've got to be somebody. He can stay in the game as long as he's not killed, and he has to kill other people to stay in the game. If the game continues for a long time, most players identify themselves with the character they are playing, and the game now becomes a real event in which the player begins to have a hard time separating reality from fantasy.

When the characters are created, the dice will govern what they will be. In the Dungeons & Dragons manuals each character will have six basic abilities: Strength, intelligence, wisdom, constitution, dexterity, and charisma. The manual guidelines determine if the character will be good or evil. And in order to survive the events in the game, each character is equipped with special weapons like magical weapons, potions, spells, magical trinkets, holy water, garlic, and stuff that comes out of witchcraft.

The object of the game is to maneuver these characters through an ongoing maze of dungeons filled with monsters, magic, ambushes, and adventures, in search of treasures, so forth. And what you really wind up doing and through all of this maze is killing each other and so forth. Everybody is trying to become the dungeon master. Everybody wants to be God.

I can't read you all of the things. It's just shocking. According to the Dungeons & Dragons instruction manual, "Wisdom is the prime requisite. Miraculous spells can be cast." And it goes on and on. There have also been some interesting incidents where homosexuality, sodomy, rape, and other perverse acts of sexuality are played out in the game, of course. And where people have actually carried this

so strongly into life that they are living their fantasies.

One young boy said that, “Ninety percent of the time he was who he was in the game, and ten percent of the time he was who he really was.” A dungeon master has powers never obtainable on earth, and has become a god in his own fantasy world. By the way, in 1980 they sold $20 million worth of the game and they expect to sell $60 million worth in this year. And, by the way, when you get killed in the game, you can get resurrected if you find the right magical source.

Now the upshot of all of this, just to give you some reaction to it, is that the game teaches witchcraft, and it teaches demon worship. It teaches how to resurrect the dead, casting spells; it uses a phrase “to con - ” I can’t remember the exact thing, but it has a term “elementals” in it. And one writer said the only other place held ever found that phrase was in witchcraft.

But the whole idea is that it gets people into the occult and it gives them the fantasy that they can become God. That’s man’s ultimate fantasy, as well as promoting homosexuality, incest, rape, and some of the things in there are so vile and wretched, and in the sequel games even far worse.

Now why would a game like this attract 3 million people who are currently playing it? Why? Because that’s man’s ultimate fantasy. He wants to be God. He wants to call the shots. He wants to control everybody around him. He wants to determines people’s destiny. He wants to determine who dies and who lives. That’s what you do in this game.

Man is religious, yes, by nature. But when he wipes God out of his life, all he’s left with is himself. And so he will push himself to be God, whether it’s the supreme dungeon master god, or whether it’s some god he manufactures in his religious mind, or whether it’s some element of secular world that he worships, he invariably will postulate a god, and then his fantasy is that he will worship that god of his own creation. The truth of it is he is worshiping the god of this world who is none other than Satan himself. That is why God’s wrath is revealed, people. That is why God is wrathful against sin, because it reflects the descent of man.

And, by the way, there’s one more step. That’s right, one more final step. I could call it “reprobation,” reprobation. You find from verse 24-32, the middle of verse 28. “God gave them over to a reprobate mind.” Neither man’s philosophy nor man’s religion can retard his vile sinfulness. So he will descend into uncleanness, into the lust of his own heart. He will dishonor his own body. That’s what he’ll do.

Verse 26, he’ll go to vile affections. He’ll become “women who exchange the natural use for that which is against nature: men the same,” lesbians, homosexuals. Verse 29. “He’ll be filled with unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, whisperers, backbiters,” and on and on and on.

You see, when you start with revelation, and you fall from there to rejection, and you fall from there to rationalization, you fall from there to religion, the next step is reprobation. You just have a reprobate mind. That means a mind that's utterly unable to discern what is right and wrong. And you fall into the gross, vile, filth that characterizes our world. And that's what God is angry about. And that's why He has a right to be angry.

Now listen to this as I close. And I'm going to get into verse 24 and 32 when I get back. It is not God's nature - and you need to hear this - it is not God's nature to delight in punishment. As I live, as surely as I live, and He lives - "As surely as I live," said the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the - " what? " - of the wicked." No pleasure. "But that the wicked turn from his way and live." And He says, "Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die?"

That's the heart of God. He is angry because His holiness reacts. That is not His desire. God delights to show mercy. God is not willing that any should perish. Jesus says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." When He drew near the city, it says, "He wept," He wept.

He said, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace, but now are they hid from your eyes. For the day shall come upon you when your enemies will cast a bank about you, surround you, hem you in on every side, dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, they will not leave one stone on another because you didn't know the time of your visitation." And He wept.

In the heart of God there are tears mingled with His wrath because He calls for men to respond to His grace. But the gospel begins with His wrath. He's angry because men are guilty.

Bow your head with me and listen to this. Many years ago a man named J. H. Clinch wrote some words that are, I think, provocative. They force us to think about the choice: Either to glorify God, or to refuse and follow the descent. He wrote this.

"And still from Him we turn away, And fill our hearts with worthless things; The fires of greed melt the clay, And forth the idol springs! Ambition's flame, and passion's heat, By wondrous alchemy transmute earth's dross to raise some gilded brute fill Jehovah's seat."

That's right. Men make gods to take God's place. That's why God's angry. Don't kid yourself that man is good, that he's on the way up. He's on the way down. Evil men grow worse and worse, not better and better. The world's not getting better and men are not getting better. They're getting worse, because that's the way it goes: From revelation, to rejection, to rationalization, to religion, to reprobation.

But it need not be so. Christ reaches out to every one of us and is not willing that we should perish. You can call on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved, right now, right where you sit. If you don't worship the true God, you are guilty, and you will spend forever in hell paying for your guilt. That's your choice. Even though you are very religious, that doesn't get you closer to God. That's the furthest away you can get if it isn't the true God, through His Son Christ.

Father, thank You tonight for Your Word. And though we've tried to cover a lot and skipped around a little bit and hurried through some things, we pray that the message has been clear. Help us to see that You're right in being angry because men have rejected what You've done. They didn't know the time of their visitation. They didn't know. Because they wouldn't know. They didn't want You. It wasn't that they were victims. It was that they refused. And it is today.

People are not lost because there's no opportunity. They're lost because they don't want opportunity. They reject it, whether they're in our culture or any other. And if they'd only accept and accept the light You give, You'd give them all the light of Christ.

We pray that that might happen in the hearts of some even tonight, for Christ's sake. Amen.

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