

The Human Death Spiral

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- [0 : 00] Well, everyone knows the song Imagine by John Lennon. It was released in 1971 at the height of the Vietnam War.
- I'm thinking that most of you are probably too young to remember. You probably weren't born at all. I myself was only a few months old at the time. Can you believe it?
- Well, I was going to play it over YouTube, but I wasn't sure about the copyright. So what I'll do is read you the lyrics instead. And I'd really like for you to get into the mood.
- So as I read the lyrics, please imagine. So here we go. Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try.
- No hell below us, above us, only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there's no countries.
- [0 : 58] It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace.
- You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will be as one. Imagine no possessions.
- I wonder if you can. No need for greed or hunger. A brotherhood of man. Imagine all the people sharing all the world.
- And then the chorus goes again. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will be as one.
- Something like that. Anyway, it's a really lovely sentiment, isn't it? And you can still see why it's such a popular song even today.
- [1 : 59] Because we all desire a world of peace where everyone lives happily ever after. Of course, one thing John Lennon saw a problem with was religion.
- Or perhaps more specifically, the belief in God. Now, he doesn't quite say so outright, but what he wants us to imagine is a world without heaven or hell.
- Well, today, as we look at our next installment in Romans, Paul invites us to do the same. In fact, Paul doesn't so much as invite us to imagine, but actually paint a vivid picture of it.
- Except what he says we get is in the utopia that John Lennon imagined. But the exact opposite. Now, before we look at the detail of it, let me just recap from last week so you see the connection.
- Remember last week in verses 16 and 17 where Paul ended? He declared the righteousness of God is now revealed in Christ. Through Jesus, we can now be made right with God.
- [3 : 03] That's the gospel of God which he announced. But then here, Paul goes straight from God's righteousness to God's wrath. He shows us that we wouldn't really appreciate how precious the gospel, the good news is, unless we see that we need it.
- Unless we discover the bad news that we need to escape from God's wrath. So here, Paul continues in verse 18. In this version of the NIV, it doesn't quite have that word.

But in the Greek, that's actually a logical connector. The word for that begins in verse 18. So it says, For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be made known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature has been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

So the word that connects last week's passage to this is revealed. The word revealed. Paul goes from one revelation to another. God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel, but now God's wrath is being revealed against all wickedness.

[4 : 30] Now firstly, notice that Paul speaks of it in the present. God's wrath is not being revealed, he says, at the end time or when you get to hell, let's say.

But no, it's now, in the present age. What this wrath looks like, exactly, we will see later in the passage. But Paul says it's happening right now.

Now it doesn't mean, of course, that all of God's wrath is being revealed now, but some measure of it certainly is. Perhaps a foretaste of what God's full wrath will be like.

Second, consider who Paul is talking about. So both here in verse 18 and then in verse 20, and then right at the end as well, Paul uses the word people. I think he means it to be quite generic.

It's like someone might say, you know, people need to social distance when they're at the supermarket. It's not a specific comment on any particular person.

[5 : 31] It's not trying to single out even groups of people. And so I think that's what Paul is doing here. He's making a general reference to people. Perhaps it's a reference to Gentiles, but he's not excluding the Jews either.

As long as people fall under these criteria, then this applies to them. But what we mustn't do then is take these verses and then point the finger at specific people or groups.

That's not what Paul is trying to do here. Neither should we then also undermine Paul's argument because we might say, oh, you know, I've seen some individuals that don't believe in God, but, you know, they don't behave like this.

So what Paul is saying here can't be true. Or vice versa. We've seen people believe in God and yet behave badly. So what Paul says here can't be true.

No, Paul's not giving us these verses. He's talking in general terms, not asking us to use these things to, as it were, accuse people. What he's saying is that there is a pattern that we can see in history, in civilizations, that when people move away from certain things, then God's wrath is revealed.

[6 : 48] So what are these people guilty of? Well, we might think at first that Paul is talking about their specific sins, things they're doing wrong. But actually, no, their main problem is this.

They have suppressed the truth, which Paul says is wicked. And what specifically have they suppressed? Well, the knowledge of God and the worship of Him.

So let me keep going to read on until verse 23, and then we'll look at this whole passage 19 to 23 together. So for although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being, and birds, and animals, and reptiles.

So with the second point that you see in today's outline, they have gone from the knowledge of God's glory and truth to the belief in lies and the worship of idols, from worshipping their Creator to created things.

[7 : 59] So Paul summarizes in verse 25, they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator who is forever praised.

Amen. This then is the source of all wickedness, if you like. It begins in the heart and the mind with the rejection of God's existence, even though Paul says in verse 19 that what may be known about God is plain to them, since God made it so.

For since creation, Paul says, God's invisible qualities, His divine power and nature are clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.

Or as we heard in today's Psalm reading from chapter 19, the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech, night after night, they reveal knowledge.

Now the knowledge here that the psalmist talks about and Paul indeed talks about in Romans 1, isn't the knowledge of God that is revealed in the Bible. That was only given to the Jews.

[9 : 11] Instead, what he's saying is that even as we look out on the world at creation, even as we interact with one another who are part of creation, our mind, our conscience tells us that there's right and there's wrong.

And that actually, because there's right and wrong, this must be because God exists. Deep down, they know that God exists because they have a sense of morality in them.

And if you look throughout history, that is indeed true. That is the general thing that you observe. All ancient civilizations have a belief in God.

Atheism as a religion is actually a relatively new and recent thing. It's not the default setting in most societies traditionally.

Instead, believing God is, as we see in the Bible, what people normally have. And then time and time again, what people do, what societies do, is start with that belief and then move away from it.

[10 : 21] Either they grow tired of it or they, if they don't reject His existence outright, they decide that they're going to reject His authority over them.

And so, just look in the book of Genesis. It happened during the time of Noah. It happened again with the Tower of Babel and then again with Sodom and Gomorrah. And, mind you, it even happened with Israel, didn't it?

We've been looking in Exodus. We haven't got to it yet. But, they went from Mount Sinai to worshipping the golden calf all within less than 40 days.

Now, some of you listening may argue that, yeah, that may be true in the past, but this time, things are different. And this time, we actually have scientific proof to show that God doesn't exist.

Well, do we? Really? I know that there are people out there who may be sincerely struggling intellectually with God's existence. I'm not trying to dismiss your doubts.

[11 : 25] In fact, you might even find arguments from science appealing and persuasive. But, what I want to challenge is the strength of these arguments, really. You see, it's one thing to look at scientific data, whether you look through the telescope or through the microscope.

But then, it is another to build a belief system based on that, which people, the likes of Richard Dawkins and others have tried to do. Because, I want to counter by saying that it's actually possible to interpret the data and find that you can have a belief in God that's consistent with that.

after all, there are actually many, many eminent scientists today who are just as likely to be Christians and believe in God than those who don't.

Well, Paul here warns us of the danger of rejecting God because there's no excuse for it. Creation leaves fingerprints of God's existence and our own conscience confirms it.

And for us who actually have access to God's revelation in the Bible, I would say that we even have less of an excuse. And here, the Bible warns us that if we decide to reject God, then what follows is the foretaste of God's wrath.

[12 : 51] As I said earlier, this original act of unbelief, which is considered wicked by God, leads to the great unraveling that we see in society and also in our lives.

It's the first step, if you like, in the human death spiral. And when we see the wickedness and the ungodliness in the world, and boy, as we look around, we see a lot of that today, don't we?

Then the Bible tells us that actually where that all begins is a rejection of God, is a rejection of His rule over our lives.

It begins when we reject what God tells us is right and wrong and we decide that we can make up our own rules. And here, Paul says that what follows then is that God hands us over to our wickedness.

So, Paul continues in verse 26, because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

[13 : 57] In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthy to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind so that they do what ought not to be done. Now, here twice, there's a mention of God giving them over.

So, gave them over to shameful lusts in verse 26, and then, sorry, in verse 26, and then verse 28, gave them over to a depraved mind. In fact, there was actually an earlier instance, so three times in total in verse 24, where God gives them over to sexual impurity.

Now, it's not like God then puts these impurities and these depraved thoughts into their minds. No, those desires and those thoughts are already latent in them.

And whilst the reference in verse 24 refers to sexual impurity quite generally, that is, anything outside marriage as ordained by God, in verse 26, Paul then now specifically refers to homosexual acts.

[15 : 11] Paul, I think, here is using that as a clear example of the type of immorality that society succumb to when their belief of God disappears or they leave it behind.

Now, of course, the Western world in general don't like these verses, do they? But I'm afraid it's clearly in God's Word. And so, the question for us is, do we try and explain it away?

Or do we, because we believe in God and submit to His Word, listen to it and work out what it means for us? Now, first of all, let me say that it may not be clear this reference to natural and unnatural.

What I think Paul is referring to here is simply nature, that's what natural is, as God intended. What's natural is what's been made according to God's design.

So, it's what the study of biology and anatomy tell us. I don't think it's a reference to our human nature because that's the other way we often think of nature and what's natural to our human nature.

[16 : 21] And that's because all of us are a mixture of what God has intended for us, which is good, and what has been corrupted because of our sin.

And so, the desires, the thoughts, and the passions we each have are a mix of both of that. And it's very hard to try and work out what is then human nature that is corrupted and what is actually human nature that's God designed.

So, I have those passions in me. I'm a mix of natural and unnatural desires. But, when people stop believing in God, what happens is that God hands them over to be dominated by that sinful nature.

They're no longer constrained by God's guiding hand. The laws and the decrees that He gives to us, they're like handbrakes that stops us, people, from careering down into sin.

But when we reject God and His laws, He hands us over to these sinful passions and they sort of take control of us. We're dominated by them. We're ruled by them now.

[17 : 29] And so, we spiral down into the vortex of sin and death. unless we think that, you know, we are going to single out just homosexual activity, Paul in verse 29 now includes all sorts of other wickedness.

He puts them on par with what he's just described. It's not a, I don't think this is even a comprehensive list, but it's a pretty fulsome one. And so, here's what Paul says, they have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity.

They're full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They're gossips, slanderous, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil.

They disobey their parents. So, even the young are not excluded. They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. And if you look at my outline, I list there the great exchange, a sad exchange, really, in this human death spiral.

We exchange what is natural with unnatural. What is glorious with shameful. What is wise to what's depraved. What is good to wicked. And this is a swap that actually makes no sense.

[18 : 43] I mean, you look at that list, who want to go from that to that? No one does. And yet, the chilling irony is people never think like that when it happens. Instead, what they're thinking is, oh no, we're moving on to better things.

We're going to be free. We're going to have a more fulfilling life. We're not going to have the straight jacket of living under God's rule. And so, back in verse 22, Paul actually says that they are claiming to be wise when they do this.

But actually, claiming to be wise, they become fools. And so, Paul ends in verse 32 by saying, although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they're not only continuing to do these very things, but also approve those who practice them.

God hands them over to these things, and instead of realizing how mistaken they are, oh no, we should be going back. No, they take it even one step further, don't they? Not only are they unashamed, they celebrate.

They take pride in what they do. They applaud and they approve others who do the same. And if you are a student of human history, and I trust that you will be, and you look back at the sweep of what's happened over history, you will find that that's the pattern of most civilizations.

[20 : 14] Great empires fall, not so much by external threats, normally, but because they become arrogant and proud. When they think that actually they are too good now for God, they lose their humility.

And what happens is that actually they cave in, they are crushed by the weight of their own sin, their own arrogance, their own pride. And friends, I don't know, but I think that actually the same thing is happening now to us in the West.

for more than a hundred years now, as a culture, we've been walking away from a belief in God. And you know what, it all started way back in the late 1800s.

It started with theological debates in seminaries, really. There were critiques, people were arguing and debating about whether God's word can be believed or not.

And at that time, it all seemed rather innocent. Except the effect of it was to actually undermine the authority of the Bible, of God's word. Now, I'm not saying here that we can't ask questions about the Bible.

[21 : 27] Every week as I write my sermon, I am asking questions about the Bible. I'm grappling with the complexities and some of the challenges of it. But it's when we then feel that we no longer need to sit under God's word, but we sit over it, in judgment of it.

And that's when the problems start. And that's what happened more than 100 years ago. And it's been playing out ever since, in churches and then in society in general.

people began questioning the Bible so much that after a while, they felt, look, actually, we don't need to actually obey what it says. Even my pastor or even some of these theologians say that this can't be believed or that can't be believed.

And I guess we saw it spill over in a big way, didn't we, in the 1960s with the sexual revolution. And then, ever since then, it's just been unraveling all the way to today.

And I find what is so heartbreaking is that as a culture, we're not walking away from a vague knowledge of God like people in Paul's day were. But no, we're walking away from our Christian heritage, a clear knowledge of God and His Son in the Gospel.

[22 : 43] These are the gifts, these are the very gifts that Paul is right now talking about here in his letter. The Gospel which he says is being spread throughout the empire, God's gift to us.

But if Paul said that there was no excuse back then, even when people didn't have the Gospel, then how much more now when we do have the Gospel? But just look at what's happening in our society.

Every basic biblical doctrine, whether it's about when life begins, the sanctity of life, the question of marriage or gender, every single thing is being picked apart, isn't it, by our society.

All the while they're claiming that this is the wise thing we need to be doing. We're doing this in pursuit of justice, of equality. And yet, when we reject what God says is right and good, when we start making up our own rules, then the Bible is warning right here in this very passage that ultimately it leads to disaster, an ever increasing spiral of death, and sin.

Unfortunately for John Lennon, it will not end as he wished. A world where there's peace and there's no division. So I guess, I don't know where we're going with our culture as our society in the West, or how fast.

[24 : 14] Maybe God, if He's merciful, might bring us to our senses before it's too light. But I have to say that will only happen when we turn to His Son Jesus by faith.

That's what the gospel is. That's the good news. The bad news is otherwise we'll keep spiraling. Righteousness is only found in Jesus.

That's the only thing that saves us from God's wrath. But I guess as well that even if the world doesn't do it, we as individuals can.

And that's, I guess, the great thing about the gospel. It's the gift for individuals, not just for society at large. Any one of us, when we believe by faith in Jesus, we can escape the wrath of God.

Even if, by and large, our society, the ones that we live in, have not. And I know many of us already have that faith, and I don't know about you, but for me, I'm always so thankful for this gift.

[25 : 17] After all, I could have easily missed out, missed out on hearing the gospel, but by God's grace and mercy, somehow, I hear the gospel, and more than that, I've been given the gift of faith to believe in it.

So, if that's you, tonight, as it should be every day of the week, be thankful that you've heard the gospel and been given the gift of faith. But that should also prompt us, I think, to pray for our friends and family.

Those who haven't heard the gospel, or those who have and still can't find it in their hearts to believe, we need to pray for them and ask God for His mercy. Because after all, we don't deserve God's righteousness any more than they do, do we?

And I know that even though sometimes it's hard because they don't really want to hear, they think we're judging them or condemning them by sharing the gospel, we should also pray for the courage to share the gospel with them.

because just like us, they too need the gospel as the only way to escape the human death spiral. So let's pray and ask God to help us to do that.

[26 : 29] God, Father, as we look at our world, we grieve that we have chosen by and large to reject the knowledge of you, even though your existence is plain to us and our conscience tells us so.

Yet we have chosen to worship created things, we've chosen to worship ourselves, material wealth, fame, fortune, instead of you, our creator. Father, forgive us.

In your mercy, help our society to turn back to you. In your mercy, help our friends and those we love to turn to you through Jesus. And give us the courage to share the gospel with them so that they may hear and escape the coming wrath.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.