

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	40		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 1:24-32; Isaiah 1:1-10		
Date:	February 16, 2025 (a.m.)		

CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN FOR OUR SALVATION (Part IV)

Many of you will remember Rod Sterling and the TV show *The Twilight Zone*. Sterling would usually begin each episode with a hypothetical scenario calling on the viewers to try and place themselves in a particular setting. Well, following suit, imagine a world in which analytical thought, logic and reasoned discourse carry little if any weight. Imagine a world where history has little significance other than to render service to some nostalgic notion of the good old days. Imagine a world where there are no absolutes, no concept of universal truth. Imagine a world where what a person prefers to believe is more important than whether or not it is true. Imagine a world where the world doesn't make sense – and nobody cares. Well welcome to *The Twilight Zone*, because what I have been describing is our *postmodern* world. According to Gene Edward Veith, in our postmodern world the intellect is replaced by the will. Reason is replaced by emotion, and morality is replaced by relativism. Reality itself becomes a social construct.¹ A recent writer described Postmodernism as, “The default worldview of our culture, is regularly played for laughs in the popular response, *whatever!* But beneath the silly quip lies a belief system largely defined by what it disregards, rather than what it affirms.”² Is objective knowledge impossible, as postmodernism claims? Should we in concert with postmodernism deny that our ideas can correspond to an external reality? Amazingly, a growing number of professing evangelicals have joined the postmodern parade. Doug Groothuis laments, “Some church-growth advocates advise that churches tone down any emphasis on the objective truth of Christian doctrine because postmodern have short attention spans and are only interested in their own felt needs. Many counsel that Generation Xers can be reached only by a relational and largely noncognitive approach. One author counsels that sense for Generation Xers “the linear method is no longer the primary method of study,” Bible studies must de-emphasize the “inductive method with its progression of observation, interpretation and application.” While this writer does not hold a postmodernist view of truth, he capitulates to the postmodern sensibilities of intellectual impatience and crass pragmatism that help contribute to truth decay in the churches. Such decay is evident in the fact that various polls have shown that high percentages of self-proclaimed evangelicals do not believe in absolute truth or the supremacy of Christ, or have a kingdom orientation to life. A recent study claimed that over half of evangelicals agreed with this statement: “The purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment.”³ The evangelical church as a result has done poorly at carrying out the task of theology. Wells says, “As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized. At a single stroke, confession is eviscerated and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one's self. The pastor seeks to pattern the pastoral office and function in terms of the two roles that the culture most admires: the manager and the therapist. This is what theology is reduced to: reflection in the academy and practice in the church.”⁴ One area where Christians often fall prey to a postmodern mindset is in misunderstanding Biblical terms (in the sense that a decidedly unbiblical definition is applied to Biblical terms usually, that is done by impregnating the word with a meaning drawn from cultural sources). One example is the word *spiritual*, which is often simply equated with *emotional*. Pentecostalism and the modern-day charismatic movement have proven to be very susceptible to this particular snare. Michael Horton has recently written: “It is well known that many westerners today describe themselves as *spiritual but not religious*. Paul Heelas and Linda

Woodhead define *spirituality* as a life based not on external authorities and expectations but *in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation*. Religion represents a life of *subordinating subjective-life to the 'higher' authority of transcendent meaning, goodness and truth, whilst the latter (spirituality) invokes the sacred in the cultivation of unique subjective-life*. This is because subjective spirituality is individualistic. Though often practiced in community, it is not defined or disciplined by any community. The individual must be free *to relate in a pick-and-choose way to old and new religious narratives, constructing his or her own life-interpreting universe, loosely woven and therefore easy to change.*"⁵

There are, however, Biblical themes that are very difficult to change to fit our cultural mindset. *Divine retribution* is one of those uncomfortable doctrines of Scripture that we tend to avoid or downplay. Isaiah 28:21 speaks of divine judgment s His "strange work." But before we jump into this passage with our contemporary mindset (one which wishes to eradicate anything we find distasteful in the Biblical picture of God) and attempt to rescue God's reputation (we want very much to domesticate God and make Him user-friendly), we need to listen carefully to what the Bible is plainly telling us about God.⁶ We need to recognize that each of us has filters through which we read the Bible, and these often hinder us from hearing what the Bible actually says.⁷ The Apostle has introduced this theme in 1:1-17, and this theme is the Gospel. Beginning with 1:18ff, Paul will unfold the history of human sin and condemnation (1:18-3:20). Divine retribution is a very real fact and one that people everywhere must face, and Paul will faithfully discharge his responsibility as a minister of the Gospel by bringing us face to face with the awful reality of reprobation. Our English word *reprobate* comes to us from the Latin *reprobatus*, "to reprove, rejected." Webster defines the word as follows: "to disapprove of strongly; condemn; depraved; corrupt; unprincipled. Often used hyperbolically of a mischievous rogue."⁸ As you can see, it is a very potent word. In fact, the word is rarely used in our day-to-day speech unless we wish to express ourselves in a way that strongly conveys contempt for a person whose believer we find absolutely offensive. We noted in our last study that Paul lays as much stress on the mental sins of mankind as he does the sensual sins. It is true to say that sensual sins flow out of and are the products of the heart and mind (cf. Matthew 15:19). One of the major theological errors that pervades large sections of the charismatic movement is the Gnostic tendency to blame *all* sin and moral failure on Satan. In light of this, it is significant that the Apostle Paul does not even mention Satan or demons until 16:20 (where Satan is described as the enemy of Christ who strives to destroy the work of Christ). The Apostle, as Schlatter has correctly noted, "rejected speculation that degraded the body of the individual or his sexual desire as the work of Satan."⁹ Romans 1:24-32 paints a vivid picture of the effects of sin upon humanity and lays the groundwork for the Apostle's Gospel.

- I. ***GIVEN OVER TO UNCLEANNESS (1:24)***. Man cannot live honorably if he dishonors God. The Apostle has charged that mankind is *ungodly* (a word that has religious overtones) and *unrighteous* (a moral term). Perversion in moral matters stems from perversion in our relationship to the living God. Romans 1:24-25 declares that since men do not worship the true God (but exchange the truth of God for a lie), God actively judges them by giving them over to uncleanness. Three times in this section (1:24,26,28) Paul will use the *paredöken* in reference to God giving people over to the consequences of their sin. What is the nature of God's activity in this? There are three positions.
 - A. ***Permissive***. This is the most popular. Simply put, God merely permits people to do what they want to do. But the force of the Greek words opposes this.¹⁰
 - B. ***Privative***. God gave them up according to this view by simply forsaking them. He abandoned them (Acts 14:16). This view is commendable, but it lacks an important element.
 - C. ***Judicial***. God does not impel people to sin (cf. James 1:13). But He does *act*. So-called "natural consequences" imply an impersonal universe with only set laws which, if violated, produce cause and effect. God not only permits and abandons people to go their own way, He actively judges them in the process. "Man remains responsible and can even be said to be giving himself over to uncleanness while God gives him up to the judgment of his sin."¹¹

- II. **GIVEN OVER TO SHAMEFUL LUSTS (1:26).** As a result of apostasy and ungodly attitudes, God gave them over to the judgment of unnatural sexual practices. To all who have read their Bibles, this section of Romans gives the Scriptural assessment of homosexuality. Needless to say, it is as relevant today as ever. The apostle uses the words *female* and *male* (not women and men as in the NIV) to stress the gender of the individuals. God made them male and female and constituted their sexuality to complement each other. Note how Paul declares homosexual behavior to be *against nature*. Homosexuality is the confusion of how God created the male in relationship to the female. To change this is a tragic reversal and a violation of God's created purpose. To go contrary to nature is to sin against the Creator.
- III. **GIVEN OVER TO A DEPRAVED MIND (1:28).** This final judicial act of God lays stress on the *mental* or *noetic* effects of sin. Listen carefully to how God appraises this situation: "Although they *know* God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (1:32). How people *think* about God does affect how they live. They spurned God and therefore He consigns to them what amounts to a *useless mind*.¹²
- IV. **UNMASKING THE HUMAN HEART.** In the last few verses of this chapter, the Apostle concludes his analysis of the human condition with an extended catalogue of sin. "These verses," writes Boice, "detail what theologians call *total depravity*, and people do not want to hear about that. So many preachers change their message to fit today's cultural expectations. They speak of our goodness, the potential for human betterment, the comfort of the gospel – without speaking of that for which the gospel is the cure."¹³ Structurally, Paul's list may be broken down into three parts.
- A. **Filled with Evil.** The participle *peplērōmenous* (filled up with) is used to introduce *four* governing forms of evil.
1. **Unrighteousness** (cf. 1:18). A total disregard for what is right as determined by God.
 2. **Evil.** Absence of moral principle; moral rot.
 3. **Selfish Greed.** This refers to both the lust for wealth and the craving to gratify any kind of lust. The word is used in Colossians 3:5 in reference to idolatry (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:5).
 4. **Depravity.** A vicious disposition. The word *kakia* basically refers to the lack of all that constitutes human excellence and contributes to a corruption of others.
- B. **Full of Bitter Anti-Social Sin.** The adjective *mestous* (to be full of) introduces five words that in act or feeling define envy and two additional terms that underscore the sinfulness of slander.
1. **Envy.** The green-eyed monster which is never isolated from other sin.
 2. **Murder.** Acts of violence which are rooted in premeditation (cf. James 4:1-3).
 3. **Strife.** Wrangling and sharp contention. This produces other maligned actions rooted in hate.
 4. **Deceit.** The attempt to mislead. The word always implies covert activity. The Greek word used here (*dolos*) literally referred to "bait for fish."¹⁴
 5. **Malice.** A disposition to take all things in the worst sense. It denotes a spiteful attitude.

6. **Gossips.** Whispering detractors. Spreading rumors and putting the worst possible slant on what they hear (cf. James 4:11; 1 Peter 2:12; 3:16).
7. **Slanders.** Closely related with the previous term. The word speaks of public denouncement, attempting to bring ruin upon someone by character assassination.

C. **Full of Themselves.** The final category contains ten expressions that speak of self-serving, self-centered pride and arrogance.

1. **God-Haters.** This describes their feelings. They are hostile to the concept that God holds them accountable for their actions. It is interesting to note that the word follows that of “slander.” The sin of pride (the sin of the devil, 1 Timothy 3:6) will always resent a Sovereign God, as the following term illustrates.
2. **Insolent.** The Greek word used here is *hybristas*. Our word “hubris” is derived from this. This is boastful pride.
3. **Arrogant.** An attitude rooted in a sense of superiority. The word *huperēphanous* literally means “to look down on;” to consider others unworthy.
4. **Boastful.** This is always based on pride. The word means to swagger (cf. 2 Timothy 3:2; James 4:16).
5. **Creative Evil-Doers.** They invent ways of doing evil (cf. Psalm 106:29). They are very productive when it comes to sin.
6. **Disobedient to Parents.** Their arrogance knows no boundaries. The whole fabric of society is torn when this sin spreads.
7. **Senseless.** This word describes their true condition. They lack understanding. “In every sin there is something both of ignorance and error at the bottom: for, did sinners truly know what they do in sinning, we might say of every sin what the Apostle speaks concerning that great sin, *Had they known him, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*”
8. **Faithless.** This does not mean that they do not believe anything, but rather they cannot be trusted.
9. **Heartless.** Lacking proper affection. It can be seen in our society today in the way abortion is touted as a woman’s choice or in the way fathers abandon their families.
10. **Ruthless.** Without mercy. The word indicates cruelty. “It is significant that, in an epistle that will stress God’s mercy throughout, the list of vices should be rounded off with *merciless*. This is the very depth of evil. The people who show no mercy can scarcely go lower.”¹⁵

Conclusion: Martin Lloyd-Jones, in a series of sermons on Isaiah 1, declares: “It is very important that we should face up to the consequences of sin, and as we do, we will see still further into its character. First of all, we need to realize the terrible *power* of sin. Let us follow Isaiah as he shows this to us, and we must start with the fact that sin is something which affects the whole of life. Isaiah says; *The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds . . .* Now that can be interpreted in two ways. I have already interpreted it to show that the whole body is like that because God has been beating this sinful creature; he has been punishing him until he is black and blue and festering with sores. But it can also be taken in another way, and I believe both are true. These words can be, and are, a perfect description of sin itself. According to the Bible, sin is not just some slight defect, some negative phase in our evolutionary progress. That is what non-Christians believe They deny that sin is positive, or that human beings are bad; it is just that they are not as good as they ought to be. But the whole point here, in Isaiah, is that men and women are positively evil in the sense that they are being controlled and mastered by this terrible power. Furthermore, the prophet says that this is something that is true of everybody – *from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it*. Now commentators are agreed that this is a pictorial way of saying that from the lowest to the highest in the land the people are all guilty; they are all

in the same boat; they are all suffering from the same thing. And that, of course, is what the Bible always says about humanity and about human nature, *There is none righteous, no, not one* (Rom. 3:10). *All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God* (Rom. 3:23).”¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ G. E. Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Crossway, 1994), p. 28.

² Rusty Benson, “Whatever!”, *Journal of the American Family Association* (Feb., 2001), p. 4.

³ D. Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (IVP, 2000), p. 21.

⁴ D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993), p. 101.

⁵ M. Horton, *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of Spiritual but Not Religious: The Divine Self*, Volume One (Eerdmans, 2024), p. 1.

⁶ The passage in Isaiah is **not** saying that God’s “strange work” of judgment is out of character. E. J. Young, noted Old Testament writer, who taught for many years at Westminster Theological Seminary, once wrote: “The purpose of His rising and His raging is to accomplish His work (cf. 5:12), even the work of judgment. Yet Isaiah describes this as a strange work, and the performing of his task as something foreign. This does not mean that in His work God will act as a stranger or foreigner would act. Nor does it mean that retributive justice is something foreign or alien to God’s nature. God is love; but God is also a consuming fire, and the work of punishment is right and just. An essential attribute of His nature is His vindicatory justice.” *The Book of Isaiah II* (Eerdmans, 1980), p. 293.

⁷ We readily acknowledge that *other* people have filters that prevent them from hearing the text, but we do not often recognize that we too come to the text with our own subjective interests. As a result, the Scriptures become muted or captive to the whims of the individual. “If our central concern in approaching the text is how it makes us feel or what it seems to be saying to us [*this is what this verse means to me* mentality], then the church is doomed to having as many interpretations of the text as there are interpreters.” Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), p. 93.

⁸ *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language: Second College Edition* (World Publishing, 1972), p. 1207.

⁹ Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans. S. S. Schatzmann (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 42.

¹⁰ The threefold use of *paredōen* is uniform, all are in the aorist tense; active voice, indicative mood, and thus cannot be softened (cf. 2 Chronicles 32:11; Matthew 10:21; 24:9; 1 Corinthians 5:5 for similar statements).

¹¹ S. L. Johnson, Jr., *Romans* (Believers Bible Bulletin, 1980), Lesson 4, p. 4.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 98. *Adokimon* (refers to something that failed a test or was disqualified; useless) *noun* (the mind or reasoning faculty). This, however, refers to more than just intellectual capacity; it is the organ of moral reasoning and willingness (cf. Romans 7:23, 25; 12:2; Ephesians 4:23). “People who have refused to acknowledge God end up with minds that are *disqualified* . . . from being able to understand and acknowledge the will of God.” Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Moody, 1991), p. 119.

¹³ J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expositional Commentary I* (Baker, 1991), p. 185.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, p. 96.

¹⁵ Boice, p. 188.

¹⁶ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way Not Ours: Isaiah 1* (rpt. Baker, 2025), p. 58.