

Psalm 81:6-16 (Opening)

6 *"I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
 your hands were freed from the basket.*
7 *In distress you called, and I delivered you;
 I answered you in the secret place of thunder;
 I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah*
8 *Hear, O my people, while I admonish you!
 O Israel, if you would but listen to me!*
9 *There shall be no strange god among you;
 you shall not bow down to a foreign god.*
10 *I am the LORD your God,
 who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
 Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.*

11 *"But my people did not listen to my voice;
 Israel would not submit to me.*
12 *So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
 to follow their own counsels.*
13 *Oh, that my people would listen to me,
 that Israel would walk in my ways!*
14 *I would soon subdue their enemies
 and turn my hand against their foes.*
15 *Those who hate the LORD would cringe toward him,
 and their fate would last forever.*
16 *But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat,
 and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."*

Did you ever have one of those days?

Not one of those bad days, but one of those days where everything just seemed to go right?

Those days tend to scare me. Not because things are going right, but because I know that things are going to come crashing down around me at any moment!

When we were living in Virginia, I had a rule: never comment about good traffic. Commenting about good traffic will never bring about anything good. In fact, it seemed that any time we said something like “Boy, traffic sure is light today”, that was the end of it. Suddenly, everything would stop. It’s like the Devil would wait until he heard you say something about traffic going well and then realize, “Oh, wait, I forgot to make the traffic jam this morning”. That’s when things start to go badly.

One of my favorite sayings is “It’s always darkest just before it goes pitch black.” And things, left to their own devices, will tend toward going to pieces.

There’s a scientific law called the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Basically it talks about heat transfer in what they call a “closed system”, but if you look at that scientific principal from a non-scientific viewpoint, it applies to a lot more stuff than just heat transfer.

The Second Law of Thermodynamics talks about something called entropy. Here’s what the Merriam Webster Dictionary has to say about entropy:

Entropy (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

A measure of the unavailable energy in a closed thermodynamic system that is also usually considered to be a measure of the system's disorder, that is a property of the system's state, and that varies

directly with any reversible change in heat in the system and inversely with the temperature of the system.

In plain English, it's the degree of disorder or uncertainty in a system. So, if entropy is the amount of disorder, let's look at what the Second Law of Thermodynamics says.

Second Law of Thermodynamics

The second law of thermodynamics states that the entropy of an isolated system never decreases, because isolated systems spontaneously evolve toward thermodynamic equilibrium—the state of maximum entropy.

Or, in plain English again, assuming nothing outside interferes, every closed system moves toward disorder.

If you've studied thermodynamics, I'll ask for a little leeway here, because I'm going to twist this law to fit more than just thermodynamics or the movement of heat.

Let's use a kid's bedroom as an example of this law. When you move into a house, the first thing we as parents want to do is make sure that the kids put everything away in their rooms and have a neat room to sleep in. It doesn't take long for things to change in that room, though. If the room remains an isolated system, that is, no parental involvement, it's very likely that the disorder in that room will increase over time. The room will be a mess. With my kids, I don't remember it taking much longer than a week.

I think the second law of thermodynamics also applies to society. If you read the first six chapters of Genesis, you'll see entropy coming into play in a big way. So much so that the world went from perfection in the garden of Eden to God destroying the world with a global flood and only saving eight humans and mated pairs of all the kinds of animals

(except the clean animals and the birds; there were seven mated pairs of them. Most people skip that part).

God knows our nature. He knows we're broken, and have been since the fall in the Garden. Paul points out our broken human nature in Romans 1:24-32. And he points out the brokenness in a big way.

Romans 1:24-32

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

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

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Three times in this section of scripture Paul uses the Greek word paradidomi (par-ad-id-o-mee), translated here as "give them up". It's another legal term that Paul uses. Paradidomi can probably best be defined as handing someone over to the authorities. It's the same word used to describe the arrest of John the Baptizer in Matthew 4:12.

It's important to remember who Paul is talking about here in these verses. He's not talking about fellow Jews (Paul was a Jew by birth), or fellow Christians. Paul is talking about "the Nations", the non-Jew, non-Christian, gentile people who were living under their own rules and doing whatever they wanted to do; what they felt was best.

Last week we talked about how these people, even though they didn't have the Law of Moses or the gospel, still had no excuse for not worshiping God because they could see His work around them everywhere they looked.

So, God allowed them to follow their own will; and we see the death spiral of their society in Paul's description. We see the entropy of society coming into play. Without God, that is, a closed system, society also tends toward disorder.

Verses 24-27 from Romans 1 shows what I think is the final result of what Paul talks about in verse 23, They "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." And because of this, because they have no real outside guidance other than other humans, they decide what's best for themselves, and not follow the design that God set up.

These verses tell me specifically that Paul's not talking about Jews. If you look in Leviticus 20:13, the punishment that God set for homosexual conduct was very simple; death. It was the same for any of the sexual sins that are listed. There obviously wouldn't have been a very high incidence of repeat offenders.

But these folks were outside the Law of Moses. Since they weren't children of Abraham, either by blood or by proselytizing, they weren't bound by those laws. So, as time went on, from Noah forward, people began to slip further and further from the truth of God, and began to rationalize their own belief systems that included idols.

Maybe it's because of the death penalty that the Law of Moses imposed on these sexual sins that we focus so much on them, making these sins out to be so much worse than other sins in our eyes.

Then again, maybe not. If you look at Exodus 21:15-17, these sins somehow don't seem to be on a par with each other, and certainly not in our minds on a par with sexual sins, but the penalty is death.

Exodus 21:15-17

¹⁵ "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.

¹⁶ "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.

¹⁷ "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

Maybe things would be better if we re-introduced the death penalty for cursing your parents. It does make me look at some of what we tend to classify as the "big sins" somewhat differently.

Let's take a look at Romans 1:29-31 again.

²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

That's a pretty despicable list. Why do people do these things? Again, Paul points back to verse 23. Since they gave up on God, God gave them up to their sins. Or maybe a better way to look at it is to say that God allowed it to happen, not because He didn't love those people (because God does love everyone), but because He wants people to realize that sin is not fulfilling and that He is.

Wait, God loves everyone? Yes. I think that God loves everyone. Turn to Matthew 5:43-48.

Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

God would not ask us to do something that He isn't already doing. God has revealed himself to everyone through His creation. He gives everyone an opportunity to worship Him as we all should. God doesn't stop loving us if we turn away from Him and start worshiping idols. But He will let us go and do that, even though it's wrong. Our earthly punishment for doing that is the consequences of our actions. If we don't turn back to God and follow Him, accepting Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, and obeying Him, then we'll face more consequences of our sins later on. But the goal of turning them over to their own sins is to eventually win them back.

Paul uses the same thought process when he writes to the church in Corinth about the member of their congregation who was sexually immoral, and the congregation there was arrogantly proud about it! Look how accepting we are! God is so good he can even cover the sins of this brother of ours who is doing something so despicable that is, in Paul's words, “not tolerated even among the pagans”. Considering Roman and Greek culture and what were considered acceptable sexual practices, that's saying a lot.

So Paul tell the church in Corinth to turn this man over to the accuser, just as God has turned those outside of the law and grace over to their sins.

1 Corinthians 5:4, 5

⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

The end goal is to bring them back. Don't forget the two primary differences here between this verse in 1 Corinthians and in Romans. Here in 1 Corinthians, the congregation is turning a believer over to the accuser, with the idea of winning him back. In Romans, it's God who is turning non-believers over to their sins.

Does that mean that God gives up on people? That we can be too far gone for God to try to win us back? Absolutely not.

Spoiler alert. Paul really answers this question in Romans 5, so let's turn there and see what he has to say about it.

Romans 5:6-8

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God not only keeps trying to win us back, he provided a way for us all to become His children! Even if we've been doing all these things in Paul's laundry list of sins here in Romans 1:29-31. We may have done them in the past, but once we learn what we're supposed to be doing and not supposed to be doing, we need to turn away from that behavior.

We can have bad behavior in our past, and even as Christians we still do things that are wrong. Paul knew there were people with some really bad sins in the church in Corinth (bad by human standards, because we are the ones that categorize sins). Take a look at 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul makes a mini-list of the list from here in Romans. I guess there weren't any murderers in the church in Corinth; at least when Paul wasn't there. You see, Paul considered himself a murderer. We was responsible for the deaths of many Christians before he was converted. He was an approving witness at the stoning of Stephen, guarding the coats of the men who participated. In Acts 8:1 it says that Saul gave his approval to Stephen's murder.

The Greek word translated as approved in Acts 8:1 is the same word used in Romans 1:32. Just like those outside the Law that Paul is talking about in verse 32, Paul himself gave approval to these sinful behaviors, and was guilty of them. We should take that to heart, too.

Sin is sin. There's no "shades of gray", no different levels, no sins that are better or worse than any other sins. In God's eyes, we follow what He wants us to do, or we don't. And if we don't, that's sin. What's the punishment for sin? Well in Romans 6:23 it says that we get paid for sinning, and our salary is death. Not how I like to get paid. But God provides a way out for us; a gift, a "get out of jail free" card, so to

speak. God wants us to have eternal life, not death. God offers us that free gift of eternal life in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins.

Yes, left to our own devices, we spiral down into the depths of depravity. Entropy or disorder increases unless we allow God to interfere with our “closed system”, like a parent making a child clean their room.

Paul has lists of sins in many different places in his letters to the churches. None of them are very flattering, but this one in Romans seems to fit our current situation here in the U.S. today.

Not only are people still doing all these sins listed here, some groups, religious and otherwise, are pushing “acceptance” and “tolerance” of different groups of people who do these things. God wants people to realize, through the earthly consequences caused by these sins, that He wants us to turn away from them and follow Him.

The consequences of our sins will always be with us, but the pain of those consequences is lessened when we accept the free gift of salvation from God through Jesus. And better still; the eternal consequences are removed, as long as we continue to try to obey.

Romans 6:20-23 (Closing)

²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Questions

1. Paul seems to equate gossip, disobedience to parents, and murder, as well as many other sins, but they seem very different to us. Why is it important to remember that there are no levels of sin?
2. Even with the egregious sins listed in Romans 1:24-32, Paul later says that God still loves us, and made a way for us to be His children. Why is God so merciful to us?
3. If you were accused and convicted of a crime, which would you rather have, justice or mercy, and why?