

# When God Gives Up

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

Bible Text: Romans 1:18-32

Preached on: Sunday, September 14, 2008

Online Sermons: [www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia](http://www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia)

## SCRIPTURE READING:

Our Scripture reading this evening is in Romans 1 where we've been studying these recent Sunday evenings and we've come to Romans chapter 1 verse 18 these last two Sunday evenings, last Sunday and this Sunday, and I want us to refresh our memories of the first part of that chapter as we read it together. Paul is expounding what he twice in the letter to the Romans calls "my gospel," to a congregation or fellowships that he has never visited, although he knows quite a number of the members of these fellowships who are living in Rome. The Gospel has penetrated the very heart of the Roman Empire, even to Caesar's household. And he is not ashamed of that Gospel. He was not intimidated by Rome and he tells us that he is not ashamed of it because God's righteousness is revealed in it and the Gospel is saving power. And this is needed, of course, because that righteousness and power is lacking in human beings. More than that, human beings, says Paul, are under the judgment of God. Romans 1:18. Page 939 in the English Standard Version Pew Bible if you're using it.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 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.*

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

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

#### OPENING PRAYER:

Our heavenly Father, as we turn our hearts and minds to the word that you have given to us, we thank you that you are an honest God. We thank you that your word is truth and we pray as we meditate together upon these sobering verses that speak so much of the darkness of the world and the sinister nature of evil and the entrapment into which sin brings men and women in all manner of ways. We pray that if you bring us low and expose the sin of our own lives or the lives of others, you will not leave us low but lift us up even through the conviction of your word and the presence of your Holy Spirit to find in Jesus Christ hope and grace and salvation. In this we pray together for Jesus our Savior's sake. Amen.

#### SERMON:

A few years ago, I think it may have been four, perhaps five years ago now, and Intervarsity group in one of the larger universities in England seeking to present

the Gospel in an imaginative way to their fellow students, had the words of Romans 1:18 and following printed up in a completely different format to the format with which we are familiar when we see these verses in the pages of our Bibles. It was printed as though it had been written in the 21st century. No Bible, no references, just the words. It was not long after in large numbers this text had been distributed that the student leaders were called before the university authorities and told in no uncertain term that they would be censored for their offensiveness. And the university authorities demanded that they produce the author of this offensive piece of writing.

Now, that tells us several things. First of all, it tells us that even learned men who have rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ may know absolutely nothing about the text in which that Gospel is expounded. Secondly, it tells us that the truth of the Gospel is offensive to men and women. And in the third place, that little incident underlined the extent to which what Paul says here, is a mirror image of the times in which we are living.

And Paul, of course, is conscious of that, speaking to his contemporaries. His purpose in writing this is not to stroke our backs and to tell us that we are capable of doing anything we want if we simply put our wills to the succeeding in it. He is not stroking our backs and saying, "You are doing as well as any other era in history has done. And so I am rather comfortably pleased with you." No, his whole purpose here in the driving logic of Romans chapters 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 20 is to shut proud mouths. And to demonstrate to us that all of us without exception are guilty and by nature condemned before the judgment seat of God. "There is none righteous, no not one."

And so it shouldn't surprise us that the message of the Gospel when it comes to self-sufficient or arrogant man is, in the first instance, an offense to him or to her. But Paul well understands that unless we feel that the offense that we feel the Gospel is to us is really an indication of the offensiveness that we ourselves have become by nature to God. We will never discover what the Gospel is. We might say until the truth of Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:20 has penetrated our consciences and our hearts and our minds and our affections to the point where our mouths are shut and we cease to make apology for ourselves, and we hold up our hand in the law court of God and say, I am guilty and lost, then the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the last analysis is incomprehensible to us, because Jesus

Christ came into the world to seek and to save those who were lost. To die on the cross for sinners.

It's Paul's concern before he brings us fully into the good news of the Gospel to help us to understand the reason it is good news is because of our powerless condition. And indeed he says here, you notice in Romans chapter 1, verse 20, that we are by nature inexcusable for not — for failing, day by day, for failing to prostrate ourselves inwardly before Almighty God and blessing him for his glory. And the result of that, he says, is chapter 1, verse 18, that "the wrath of God," now notice the tense, "is revealed." The average man or woman in the street and potentially even the average man or woman in the visible Christian church, thinks that where God is going to reveal his wrath is at the end of time, if at all. But what Paul is saying is this: that against the unrighteousness and ungodliness of men and women, God's wrath is already being revealed if we only had the eyes and the sense to see it and to understand it.

And he presses this upon us in a very extraordinary piece of literary logic which is held together, you'll notice, by two refrains. There are two courses run through these verses from verse 18 to verse 32. The first refrain is about exchange. Chapter 1, verse 23, "we have exchanged the glory of God for images" and our hearts are full of idolatry. Now we don't seem to be building idols the way they did in antiquity but our hearts, as Calvin says so brilliantly in his great Institutes of the Christian Religion, "the heart of man is a perpetual factory of idols", and so we bounce from one idol to another. Things that we have created with our hands that we have a passion for, that far outweighs any passion we might have for God and his glory and the good things he has given us.

And then that refrain comes in again, you notice in verse 25. The tragedy of this is that we have "exchanged the truth for the lie." And the problem is when you believe the lie, you're not able to discern the truth. And then as that works out, you notice again, the third time this refrain appears in verse 26, is the exchange of "natural relations for unnatural relations", or in the ESV, "natural relationships between women and between men and women for relationships that are contrary to nature".

Now, what is Paul speaking about here? Well, what he's concerned to say in this whole section is that "we have all sinned and we have fallen short of the glory of

God"; that over our lives is written that name, you remember, that comes from the days of Samuel and Eli and his two sons. When his two sons die and Eli dies in response. The shock pushes him over, he breaks his neck, even while his daughter-in-law apparently is in labor and dies in labor, but before she dies as they're urging her to be encouraged that a boy has been born, she says, "Call him Ichabod, the glory has departed." Where is the glory?

Now, what's is Paul speaking about here when he says we exchange the glory of God? You know, part of the answer, we don't have time to go into the whole answer but part of the answer to that question is tucked away in the most completely unpredictable place in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in chapter 11, in a place where you would never expect, I don't suppose, to discover this amazing nugget of truth that the Apostle Paul comes up with from a strange discussion about how men and women are to behave when they are in the presence of God and engage together in worship. And he says in 1 Corinthians 11:7, "a man ought not to cover his head" — now, forget about the intricacies of Paul's discussion about what's going on in Corinth and look at the reason he gives, "since he is the image and glory of God." "He is the image and glory of God".

Sometimes, and this is one of the points Paul makes, sometimes a man will say about his wife, "She is my glory." What does he mean? What he means is that if you want to see what shows my real significance, you look at her. She is my glory. It's there that there is the effulgence, the fullness, of what it means to love one another in the home and in the family.

And Paul says now, he says the woman is the glory of the man, but the man is the glory of God. What is he saying? He is saying that when man was made as the image of God and lived reflecting the character of God, that man lived, as it were, as a bright reflection of God's glory. God's power. God's goodness. God's kindness. And so when men sin, says Paul, they fall short of the glory of God and something inevitably therefore happens. When we fall short of the glory of God and exchange the glory of God for imagery and idolatry, everything begins to fall to pieces. When we cease to live according to the maker's instructions, all the clockwork pieces inside of us begin to dangle out of joint. Isn't it in Hamlet, in Shakespeare's Hamlet? The times are out of joint. What's the explanation? This is the explanation: when the glory goes, everything tends to moral and spiritual

chaos. And men are unmanned and women are, as it were, disintegrating forms of what they were called to be. And Paul is showing us in the most egregious sense what that looks like when it works out in human life. A deterioration from moral glory to moral chaos. But I want you to notice the point he's making is, that doesn't just happen by accident, that happens by divine design.

And that's why there is another refrain that runs through these verses that is at least, if not more, solemn than the first refrain. We can casually exchange God for trivialities in our lives and begin to see moral and spiritual disintegration. We don't love him as we ought. We are not energized by him. We fit him into our little pockets and we say, Now behave in there, you domesticated God. And Paul says that in response to that, there is a divine activity, and in that divine activity, verse 24, verse 26, verse 28, "God hands us over to our own desires".

Isn't it C. S. Lewis who says somewhere in one of his many works the most terrible words that can ever be uttered in all the universe are when God says in holy judgment to a man or to a woman, "Well then, thy will be done."

And you see how he works this out. He works it out in three segments, verses 24 to 26. God gives this rebellious man over to an unclean mind in the lusts of his impurity, to the activities of an impure mind coming to expression in his body. He gives him over. It's a form of judgment. It's not at the end of the day an expression of freedom from God, at the end of the day it's an expression of being under the judgment of God.

And the kinds of things he says here are almost embarrassing to read in a public occasion like this. I sometimes wonder, as you know, if a Martian came from Mars, supposing there are Martians on Mars which I don't suppose, but you know the laws are in place. I know that because I have a friend who is involved in making them, the laws are in place to determine the security of our first alien visitor. It's actually greater security than many aliens have, isn't it? It's amazing, really. That's beside the point. The Martian comes and he can't read the languages we use. He can't read the books. So he decides, Now, I'm going to have to interpret what drives this society from what I see them doing. And they do seem to be a religious society but what is it that they worship?" Do you know what name he would give to that God simply by observation? He would call that God Eros, eroticism. Wouldn't he? You can hardly buy an automobile these days,

at least if you're tempted into it by an advertising campaign, without a little element of that being erotic. And it fills your spam box on your computer. And it lures you in, in all kinds of ways. And it's everywhere. It is absolutely everywhere. And you see, when this begins to happen, when this begins to happen, then strangely in our world of pluralism an unusual totalitarianism begins to develop.

Now, those of us who are middle aged don't know so much about this as those of us who are college age. The things that are said by statisticians and psychiatrists about what is going on in the world of the college age would be unimaginable to anyone here who is in their 70s. Absolutely unimaginable. To that point where there are very few things of which people are less tolerant than sexual purity. Isn't that right? Have you noticed how angry people get? And you see what's happening, Paul is saying, "God has given you over to your religion." God gives you over to your religion and the next thing that happens is that religion demands total loyalty. And despises and demeans those who get in the way. This isn't a 21st-century, Western, English-speaking world or North American phenomenon, my friends, — but it sure is a sign of being under the judgment of God and God giving us up.

And you know, if it weren't so tragic, it would be hilarious. If we could only see ourselves the way the little martian would see us. Let me try and illustrate this in a rather light way. Some of you who wear spectacles as I do, have you noticed this week when you've come out of your car and the air conditioner and your spectacles are all misted up to an unusual degrees this week? I see a number of you nodding. And this prompted a memory from 40 years ago. I was getting on a double-decker bus as a young student and in Scottish double-decker buses, you can stand on the bottom but you may not stand on the top, and the bottom was absolutely full. It was a cold November day and as I went into the warm bus, my spectacles misted up. I clambered like an old man up the stairs where you're not allowed to stand. And I thought, "There must be a seat here." And so completely unable to see, my spectacles misted up and getting more misty, I kind of found my way seat by seat forward toward the front where I was sure there must be a seat. And I almost banged into the front window on top of the bus and I realized to my, well, not eternal but long-standing embarrassment that probably every eye on top of the bus was looking at this strange creature who was finding his way forward to the front of the bus, looking for a seat and there was no seat to be found. And I knew either I was going to stand like this at the front of the bus for

the rest of the journey or I was going to have to turn around, my spectacles still misted and in some ways I was glad that they remained that way, but every single person on the top of the bus was going to be, "Who is that idiot?" And I'll tell you, I walked around the university campus. Our university had only about 3,000 students in it, you could recognize most of them. You know, I wanted to put my head under my jacket. I had that strange feeling everybody is looking at me and laughing at me behind my back. That's the idiotic fellow whose spectacles were so misted he didn't see the bus was full. And you would laugh. I can almost laugh at it myself. Every time I tell people about it, they laugh at it. Now, this is exactly the same except it's not a laughing matter. It's anything but a laughing matter but if we could see ourselves in our society.

Do you think God is intimidated by this? Oh no, says the psalmist, "He who sits in heaven laughs and has them in derision." And they are shaking their little face at God, Look at how free we are. We can do our will. Blast you, God, and your judgment! No wrath here! And all the while we're actually under that wrath and "our foolish hearts are darkened", says Paul, and we can't see straight.

So God gives men over to an unclean mind. Second, God gives men over to dishonorable passions. And this is a passage that's, again, so painful for us to read. Notice, I think the commentators have many explanations of why Paul deals with women first and then with men. And my own conviction is that I think this is Paul at his most sensitive. In a verse he says, "the women give up natural relations with women for unnatural, and the men give up natural relations with men for unnatural". They make a bad choice. They give up natural relations. They are consumed with lust then and that's a bad start. They commit shameless acts; and, that's a bad lifestyle. And, says Paul, they receive the due penalty for what they have done.

Now, that language actually is very interesting because in that one phrase, Paul seems to be hinting at something. Because, you see, in this condition people say, they inevitably say, it's the only thing they can say to God, We can do this to our heart's content and there is no judgment. And Paul is really saying, Yes, but your heart isn't really content, is it? It's not really content, is it? And actually the fact that you do it with such apparent freedom and license is the clearest evidence of God's judgment.



And as I say, the very language he uses, “they receive”, that is, they receive in return what was due them. — sense of righteousness and justice. It's one of Paul's many ways of saying, listen, the Judge of all the earth does what is right, and the mode in which he judges us, the way in which he shows his wrath against us in this world is invariably in terms of the way in which we have shown our rebellion against him. That's the divine way. The divine way is to say, If you shake your fist in my face and say, my will be done, then I will place my hand of authority up and say, therefore your will be done and I give you over to that and to all the consequences of it in your life.

I wonder if Paul said this with a breaking and bleeding heart because his world was very much like our world. What's the most important thing, incidentally, to notice here? It's the way in which he emphasizes that this lesbian and homosexual lifestyle is contrary to nature. That's the tragic thing about it. And notice he's not saying close bonds of friendship, men with men are contrary to nature. He's not saying that wonderful sisterhood that some women have, that that's contrary to nature. You know, one of the blessings to me of these last few days, I have had some of the men I most dearly love in all the world who are my brothers in Christ here. That's far from contrary to nature. That's one of the blessings of God to us. But, you see, Paul is saying that sexual relationships, sexual activity, that's contrary to nature. My dear friends, our anatomy tells us that. And, you see, what really lies behind it is, it's an assault on the Creator. At the end of the day, it's an assault on the Creator. It's either saying, you haven't made us, or it's saying, you should not have made us this way. And when we see that, when we see that in the midst of all this, we understand how it's possible to have a broken heart over what we see in our society.

Now, Paul doesn't say anything here about how this actually happens. This is not a piece of psychology or psychiatry. But it's not difficult to understand what Paul would say to us if we asked him that question. It's quite simply this. It's when the glory departs, when the glory departs, one of the first things that happens is family life breaks down and young men cease to have a model of manliness, God imaging manliness. And young women cease to have a model of God imaging womanliness. And that's so pervasive today in our society. I mean, the average time a father spends with his children today, you've seen the statistics, no wonder!

And then you see there are those who have gone that way before and you notice what Paul says at the end of this chapter, he says, if you persist in this way, the time comes when the only thing you can do to try and quiet your conscience is to get others to do it. And so you see a young man or a young woman struggling with their personal identity and you go along and say, no, really, you should just be coming out. You're gay. And they're not gay. They're just struggling sometimes with all the struggles that young people often in a dysfunctional home or family or society — where nobody is saying, this is God's model for life and to follow it will bring you intense joy and a glorious sense of purpose. And you see, when that goes, what inevitably happens is, that we turn in upon ourselves and God is saying, if that's the way you want it, you may have it that way but it's only going to lead to tragedy and disaster, and at the end of the day you'll need to get others even while your conscience tells you that this is the way to a lost eternity. You'll have to do something to silence that voice. That's what Paul says.

He doesn't regard these people as his personal enemies that he's speaking about anymore than he regards an adulterer. My friends, what's wrong with adultery? Ultimately what's wrong with adultery is it's contrary to nature. You lust after somebody to whom you are not married. You lust after somebody to whom you are married. Well, you say, no, that's natural. No, that's sinful. What we are created to do by nature, to enter into these relationships of dignity and glory. And you see, people have almost lost any sense that that would be possible in this world and so down and down it goes. God “gives them up to an unclean mind, to dishonorable passions.” And then finally in verses 29 to 32, “to a debased mind.” And you see it in this long list of all the things that come out. Sin manifesting itself in the hearts and breaking out in a breach of God's law. Sin leading to abandonment. Sin leading people to the point where the only way they can silence their consciences is by dragging others into their own sin. Because they think there is safety in numbers from the wrath of God. But God is giving them over to their sinful desires. It's heartbreaking. It's heartbreaking to see a young man drawn into this. When a Christian might come along and say, my friend, don't exchange the truth of God for a lie.

Now I ask the question, is there any hope? Well, there are two answers to that question. Strangely enough, they are found in precisely the same two verses of the scriptures. Don't turn to them but I'll give them to you. Some of you will recognize them. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the

kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." Is there any hope? No. That's the first answer. No. None of these people in that condition will enter the kingdom of God. Is there any hope? Oh yes! For Paul continues, "and such were some of you." Isn't that wonderful? It's absolutely amazing to think that I could have been engaged in those lifestyles, all of those lifestyles that Paul is speaking about here and it might be possible for somebody to say, you were such a one as that but, listen to Paul, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God."

Just give me a moment to say aside to just somebody who might be out there that I know nothing about you. I may even know you but I know almost nothing about you. And you may need these verses simply to keep surviving. That in 1 Corinthians 6:10-11 Jesus Christ gives us hope. He can change us. And he has promised to do that in the Gospel of his Son. He doesn't promise that the struggle will be easy. He doesn't promise to carry us to heaven in flowery beds of ease. It doesn't matter whether you are a thief or an adulterer or a homosexual. He's not saying it's going to be easy but he is saying by God's grace it's possible because there is more grace in Jesus Christ than there is sin in you.

Now hear my last words on this passage. We could easily spend weeks on it, and I rush through it because it is so sore to speak about these things in a public gathering like this. But here's a very interesting statistic. Paul in these verses speaks about God judicially handing sinners over to his judgment. That's not the last time he uses that idea in this letter. And the language he uses here — three times, he uses three times again. And I've only the opportunity to tell you one of those times. It may be the best of those times. It's in Romans 8:32 when he says "God did not spare his own Son but freely, graciously, handed him over for us all." And if that's true, says Paul, you can be sure that Jesus Christ will be the means of God giving you everything you need.

Let me because this is sore to speak about, my friends, but it's real. This is our world, isn't it? The church would be withdrawing from its responsibilities if it didn't recognize this is our world. Let us imagine that there is somebody who is homosexual and practices homosexuality engaging with a text of Scripture like

this, and who is conscious, has never found their heart's content in this way of life, and who has lost hope that there might be, just somehow might be a way back. What are you to say? Here is what you are to say: as I have been delivered over to this lifestyle and know it to be a lifestyle under the judgment of God, I say to the Lord Jesus Christ as he hangs upon the cross, Jesus Christ upon the cross, you bore the judgment of God against my homosexual practices, my adultery, my covetousness, my idolatry, and from the cross you will hear him give you the clearest evidences that this he has done when he cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you handed me over to be forsaken?" He has gone down further than you have and he is able to come and embrace you and say, "Such were you but I wash you, I cleanse you, I sanctify you, I will change you and I will bring you to glory."

Now, my friends, let me speak to you very straightly — very straightly. There is no point in being conservative on these matters, there is only a point of Christians being Gospel- centered and Christ-centered in these matters. And what a tragedy it would be if all the Christian church did was to condemn without bringing the Gospel to those who are in great need. Thank God for those who do. Some among us, thank God for those who do. And what a great thing this is no matter what my sin is. That in between the present expression of God's judgment and the final expression of God's judgment, I can come to Jesus Christ and say, save me and make me well. Is that what you need tonight? Whatever your sins may be, whatever form they take, save me and make me well. And he has promised, listen to this, he has promised that whoever comes to him, he will "never", get that word, "never cast out." Oh, what a Savior. What a Gospel.

Let's pray together.

#### CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, this is all too much for us to think about. Such depths of sin. Lifestyles to which we have all kinds of different sensibilities. It's awful to us to think about it. But we pray that we may not be paralyzed by its awfulness to forgetting your mercy for ourselves and for others. So help us, we pray, as we come to you and as we come to this table. In Jesus our Savior's name. Amen.