

The Consequences of the Fall and the Depravity of Man According to the Letter to the Romans

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I. INTRODUCTION

The sin of Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen 3) had immense consequences not only for the human race, but also for the whole of creation. As Francis A. Schaeffer pointed out, not only was the communion between Man and God broken, but also the communion between Man and his fellow Man, and Man and the creation. Furthermore, Man has also been separated from himself.¹

The purpose of this paper is to examine in detail the Apostle Paul's teaching in the book of Romans regarding the consequences of the Fall of Man, and the depths of depravity to which he has descended.

II. CONSEQUENCES OF THE FALL

1. The Utter Sinfulness of All Humanity (3:9-12; 5:12)

In Romans 5:12, Paul teaches that due to Adam's sin death entered the world² and spread to all Men. Douglas Moo argues that death (Gk. *qanatoj*) here refers to "total death" – spiritual and physical – especially since it is contrasted with eternal life (Gk. *zwhn aiwnion*) in v. 21.³ The *entire* human race⁴ was, and is, faced with the reality, finality and inescapability of death.

In addition, Charles Cranfield points out that v. 12 is a chiasmus:⁵

¹ F. A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 5 vols. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1985) 2:70.

² The genitive phrase *dia thj- a[ra]t iaj* ("through sin") appears to be instrumental (means). Cf. description of "Ablative of Means" in J. A. Brooks & C. L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988) 26-27.

³ D. Moo, *Romans 1-8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1991) 331-332.

⁴ Note that when Adam and Eve sinned, they were, in fact, the entire human race.

⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 274.

A sin
 B death
 B' death
 A' sin

This arrangement causes the reader to focus on the central items B and B', i.e. death. Note also, A and A' highlight that it is *sin* that leads to this death.

In 3:9-12, Paul quotes Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3 and Ecclesiastes 7:20, in order to show that sin has a hold of every person – both Jews and Greeks – with no exception. No-one is righteous in God's eyes and no-one naturally seeks after Him; all have turned and gone their own way. These quotations also appear to be arranged chiasmically:

A "There is no one righteous, not even one;
 B there is no one who understands,
 C no one who seeks God.
 C' All have turned away,
 B' they have together become worthless;
 A' there is no one who does good, not even one."

S. L. Johnson Jr. perceptively notes that

This sense of universal guilt is one of the profoundest facts in human history and experience. It seems to be so much a part of human nature that we cannot be said to be human unless we have it. It is found in the most primitive societies, those least exposed to the experiences of civilization. The universal prevalence of the practice of sacrifice illustrates it, as Davies points out. "Whatever the differences between ancient religions—and they are very many," he says, "they were united in their recognition that man had offended his gods and that their anger must be placated."⁶

2. *Objects of Wrath and Judgement (1:18; 2:5-11)*

God, who judges based on truth (2:2), has found all humanity guilty of sin, and we now face His inescapable righteous wrath and judgement. However, the use of the present tense in 1:18 ("is being revealed," Gk. ἀποκαλύπτεται), indicates that God is continuously revealing His wrath. This raises two questions: (1) What is meant by "reveal"? (2) In what way is God continuously revealing His wrath from Heaven? This verse also appears to contradict 2:5 which states that we are storing up wrath against ourselves for the future judgement.

In regard to (1), does ἀποκαλύπτεται mean "reveal [a truth] to mind" or "manifest [an action] in history?" Given that v. 17 and v. 18 are apparently parallel, and that ἀποκαλύπτεται has an historical sense in v. 17, it is reasonable to understand it in the same way in v. 18.⁷

⁶ S. L. Johnson, Jr., "Studies in Romans Part IX: The Universality of Sin", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (Apr 1974) 164.

⁷ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 95.

Regarding (2), Douglas Moo argues that “there is an anticipatory working of God’s wrath in the events of history”⁸ and that “[t]he present, continuous exercise of God’s wrath will be culminated in a climatic outpouring of wrath at the end of history”⁹ i.e. on the day of judgement. God’s wrath is currently visible in that He has released humanity to pursue its chosen way of sin, and the resulting consequences.¹⁰ Schiller comments: “The history of the world is the judgement of the world.”¹¹ Indeed, the present experience of wrath is only a foretaste of the wrath to come at the final judgement.¹²

Note that the target of God’s wrath is actually the godlessness and unrighteousness of humanity rather than humanity in general. Cranfield suggests that *asebeia* (“godlessness”) and *adikia* (“unrighteousness”) are combined to give “a more rounded description” of man’s sinful acts. The first term highlights the fact that sin is an attack on the majesty of God, and the second shows that it is a violation of God’s justice and righteousness.¹³

Moo also points out that vv. 6-11 form a chiasmus:

- A God “will give to each person according to what he has done.”
- B To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.
- C But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.
- C’ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;
- B’ but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.
- A’ For God does not show favouritism.

This arrangement draws the reader’s attention firstly to the fact of God’s fairness and impartiality, and then to the rewards for those who do good. The culmination, however, is on the terrific wrath that will be poured out at the final judgement on all those who have rejected the truth and followed evil.

3. Helplessness (7:15-24)

In Romans 7:15-24, Paul expresses his frustration and anxiety over his own sinfulness and his apparent helplessness. He does not understand why it is that he does not do what he desires to do (i.e. practice God’s righteous law), but instead, does those things which he hates (i.e. sin). Paul explains that it is not him doing this, but sin living in him. Note however, that this is not an excuse for sinning, but rather an acknowledgment of the total control which sin has over his flesh.¹⁴ V. 24 is an indication of the total despair

⁸ Ibid. 96.

⁹ Ibid. 134.

¹⁰ Ibid. 96.

¹¹ As quoted by Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 96.

¹³ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 112.

¹⁴ Ibid. 360.

which Paul has in regard to this problem: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

4. *A Spoiled World (8:19-22)*

In Romans 8:19-21, Paul teaches that God has subjected the “creation” to frustration by enslaving it to decay. Cranfield argues that, in this context, *ktiſij* refers to all subhuman creation, both animate and inanimate.¹⁵ However, the use of language such as “waiting in eager expectation,” the experience of “frustration,” the lack of “choice,” the experience of “decay” and the notion of “groaning” all suggest that only the animate creation (i.e. the animal kingdom) is in view. The animal kingdom has been subjected to the frustration of not being able to completely fulfil the purpose for its existence.¹⁶

The “decay” (Gk. *thj- fqoraj-*) of v. 21 is probably an objective genitive – creation is in bondage to the decay that rules the world after the Fall.¹⁷ The consequences of the Fall had a devastating effect not just on humanity, but also on other living creatures, and the earth itself. As E. C. Beisner states:

“The corruption of people’s knowledge, holiness, and creativity affected not only their own inward nature but also their dominion, cultivation, and guarding of the garden and, ultimately, the whole earth.”¹⁸

Schaeffer also points this out:

The fourth separation is a separation of man from nature and nature from nature. Man has lost his full dominion, and now nature itself is often a means of judgment ...The separation of man from nature and nature from nature seems also to have reached a climax in our day.¹⁹

III. THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN

1. *Suppression of Truth (1:18-20)*

Traditionally, it has been assumed that Paul is talking here about Gentiles, but this conclusion is now being questioned.²⁰ It seems more likely to be a universal indictment, especially since the scope of vv. 19-32 includes all people, both Jews and Gentiles, and examines their responsibility to God apart from special revelation.²¹

¹⁵ Ibid. 411-412.

¹⁶ Ibid. 413. Also Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 552.

¹⁷ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 553.

¹⁸ E. C. Beisner, “*Imago Dei* and the Population Debate”, *Trinity Journal* 18:2 (Fall 1997) 186.

¹⁹ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 2:69.

²⁰ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 92.

²¹ Ibid. 92-93.

The use of present tense to describe the suppression of truth (Gk. *katexōtwn*) suggests that this is a continuous and general human trait.²² Because of the use of the aorist indicative to describe God's clear presentation of truth (Gk. *efanērwsen*), and the reference to creation in vv. 19-20, some commentators have suggested these verses refer to a specific *event* such as the Fall in Genesis 3. However, *efanērwsen* ("to make obvious") is most probably a *constative* aorist, denoting the *fact* that God has made general knowledge about Himself plain to all men, rather than communicating the timing of this act.²³ This view also does not fully explain the character of the text, and in any case, v. 18 and v. 32 make it clear that rejection of God is repeated in every generation by every individual.²⁴

Note also that according to v. 18, the suppression of truth is "in unrighteousness" (Gk. *ἐν ἀδικίᾳ*). However, as Moo points out, *ἐν ἀδικίᾳ* is an instrumental dative, denoting the *means* by which the suppression occurs i.e. through unrighteous acts.²⁵

One of the purposes of natural revelation is to render all people responsible for their condemnation. It is clear that this revelation is generally rejected. Therefore, natural revelation does not lead people to salvation, but rather, ensures that God's condemnation is just.²⁶

Schaeffer insightfully summarises the consequences of humanity's tendency to suppress the truth as follows:

Man's basic psychosis is his separation from God carried into his own personality as a separation from himself. Thus we have self-deception. All men are liars, but, most importantly, each man lies to himself. The greatest falsehood is not lying to other men, but to ourselves. A related aspect is the loss of ability to acquire true knowledge. All his knowledge is now out of shape because the perspective is wrong, the framework is wrong. That is, man does not lose all his knowledge, but he loses "true knowledge," especially as he makes extensions from the bits and pieces of knowledge he does have.²⁷

2. Foolish and Futile Thinking (1:21-22, 25, 28)

With no knowledge of God there is no basis for truth, morals or ethics, so it is only expected that things which should not be done, will be done. People no longer give glory to God by recognising Him as God and as their Creator and Lord, neither do they acknowledge their debt to God for His goodness and generosity, and as the source of all good things.²⁸ As a result, their thinking became completely futile. Again, the aorist indicative (Gk. *ἐμῆταιωῆσαν*) is most likely a *constative* aorist, denoting the fact of futility, rather than its timing. The idea expressed by *ἐμῆταιωῆσαν* is that of

²² Ibid. 93.

²³ Indeed, the constative aorist is by far the most common use of the aorist, especially with the indicative. See D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996) 557.

²⁴ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 93.

²⁵ Ibid. 98.

²⁶ Ibid. 101.

²⁷ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 2:69.

²⁸ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 117.

worthlessness,²⁹ and dialogismoj (thoughts/thinking) denotes the ability “to think or reason with thoroughness and completeness.”³⁰ Furthermore, Cranfield points out that in the clause “their foolish hearts were darkened”, kardia is qualified by asunetoj, which suggests that the intellectual element of their inner lives is in view.³¹ When knowledge of God is suppressed, man’s ability to think and reason clearly and deeply is significantly inhibited.

Cranfield suggests that Paul is referring to the “futility which is the inevitable result of loss of touch with reality.”³² Thus it appears that the corruption of the intellect is one of the direct consequences of the Fall.³³ Indeed, every aspect of the image of God in humans was corrupted by the Fall. As Beisner notes: “What had been a sound mind full of the light of truth, full of the God who is the Truth, became unsound and darkened by falsehood.”³⁴

In v. 22, Paul emphasises the difference between humanity’s own opinion and actual fact.³⁵ Despite our mighty claims of knowledge and wisdom, and our technological achievements, we have shown ourselves to be utterly foolish. The devastation humanity has caused to the environment, the overfishing, the extinction of species, the over-mining, and the production of nuclear waste all bear testimony to this, as do the many wars, the oppressive political regimes and the immense poverty in many nations.

In v. 25, Paul states that humanity has “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” which suggests that we had the truth but wilfully and intentionally decided to reject it in favour of a lie. As S. L. Johnson Jr. perceptively points out:

The Pauline picture of the religious history of mankind is one of retrogression, not progression, of devolution, not evolution, downward, not upward. In unbelief man has passed from light to futility to folly. Thus, the divine wrath has found its justification in human rejection of “the truth of God” (1:18,25).³⁶

According to v. 28, humanity has refused to seriously acknowledge their need for the knowledge of God, and thus failed to retain it. Therefore, God released them to pursue their folly. The term “depraved” (Gk. adokimoj) means “not being in accordance with what is right, appropriate, or fitting,”³⁷ or “unfit for any good deed.”³⁸ Thus, adokimon noua (“depraved mind”) is a mind so deliberated and corrupted it is completely untrustworthy for making moral decisions.³⁹

²⁹ See W. Bauer, F. W. Gingrich, & F. W. Danker (BAGD), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

³⁰ See J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida (Louw-Nida), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989) 30.10.

³¹ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 118.

³² Ibid. 117.

³³ Ibid. 118.

³⁴ Beisner, “*Imago Dei* and the Population Debate”, 185.

³⁵ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 118.

³⁶ S. L. Johnson, Jr., “God Gave Them Up: A Study of Divine Retribution”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (Apr 1972) 125.

³⁷ Louw-Nida, 88.111.

³⁸ BAGD.

³⁹ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 128.

3. Idolatry (1:23, 25)

In v. 23 and v. 25, Paul describes humanity's strong tendency to reject the little knowledge of God they do have, by making idols of their own.⁴⁰ In the modern western world, such idols take the form of self, sex, sport, sports people, celebrities, the environment, work, pleasure, and possessions, rather than icons of men and animals. The "truth of God" in v. 25, refers to God Himself and His self-revelation. The "lie," on the other hand, refers to the whole futility of idolatry⁴¹ – which is so well expounded by Isaiah the prophet (Isa 44:9-20). Again, the use of "exchanged" suggests that the move to idolatry was both wilful and deliberate.

4. Sexual Perversion (1:24, 26-27)

Not only has humanity turned to idolatry, but also to sexual infidelity and perversion. The clause "gave them over" (Gk. *paredōwken*) does not mean that God compelled people to sin. Although this clause has caused considerable debate, the most common interpretation, which has prevailed since the time of Origen and Chrysostom, views *paredōwken* in a permissive sense. This means that God passively permitted men to fall into the retributive consequences of their infidelity and apostasy. However, S. L. Johnson Jr. objects:

The active force of *paredoken* is surely contrary to this view. It is not that God permitted rebellious men to fall into uncleanness and bodily dishonour; He actively, although justly in view of their sin, consigned them to the consequences of their acts. It is His divine arrangement that men by their apostasy should fall into moral impurity, sin being punished by further sin, and He himself maintains the moral connection between apostasy and impurity by carrying out the judgment Himself.⁴²

Yet, in the final analysis, it seems that Johnson's view is not that much different. He emphasises the "active force," but surely God can actively release Man to do as he pleases (i.e. rebel and disobey God), and in doing so, passively permit him to do all kinds of evil?

Note also that this term was used to describe God's dealing with Israel in handing them over to other nations as punishment for their disobedience.⁴³ It is not as if God actively caused the Israelites to be defeated or that he forced enemy armies to attack and destroy them. Rather, in response to Israel's rebellion and rejection of Him as their God, God obliged by actively withdrawing His protection, and therefore, passively allowing Israel's enemies to destroy and plunder them.

C. H. Dodd writes:

the disastrous progress of evil in society is presented as a natural process of cause and effect, and not as the direct act of God... The act of God is no more than an abstention from interference with their free choice and its consequences.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 105.

⁴¹ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 123.

⁴² Johnson, "God Gave Them Up", 126-127.

⁴³ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 105.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 120.

Again, it appears that God apparently removes His active restraining influence and allows people to do exactly as they please. This is a form of punishment in the sense that being left to please one's self in choosing evil brings its own penalty (v. 27). For example, infidelity leads to mistrust and marriage break-down, promiscuity often results in unwanted pregnancy, or the contraction of venereal diseases, or even AIDS. Indeed, Harvard sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, in his book *The Crisis of Our Age*, warned that increases in crime, suicides, mental breakdowns, revolutions, and war are the symptoms of a dying civilisation. In another article on homosexuals in *Time* magazine he wrote, "At their fullest flowering, the Persian, Greek, Roman and Moslem civilizations permitted a measure of homosexuality; as they decayed, it became more prevalent." In another book, *The American Sex Revolution*, he pointed out that sex anarchy has led to mental breakdowns, rather than the other way around, as the Freudian psychologists have taught. He also pointed out that increasing sexual license leads to decreasing creativity and productivity in the intellectual, artistic, and economic spheres of life.⁴⁵ Schaeffer adds:

...man has separated his sexual life from its original high purpose as a vehicle of communication of person to person. Sexuality loses its personal dimension; men and women treat each other as things to be exploited.⁴⁶

5. *Practitioners of Every Kind of Evil (1:29-31; 3:10-18)*

In 1:29-31, Paul lists some specific characteristics of sinful humanity. Note however, that the list is by no means exhaustive, but rather, a small sample. Moo suggests that Paul is focussing on social ills.⁴⁷ The kind of behaviour described highlights the broken relationship between man and his fellow man which has come about as a direct result of the Fall. As Schaeffer points out:

The third of the great separations is man from man. This is the sociological separation. We have seen already how Adam was separated from Eve. Both of them immediately tried to pass off the blame for the Fall. This signals the loss of the possibility of their walking truly side by side in true democracy. Not only was man separated from his wife, but soon brother became separated from brother, Cain killing Abel.⁴⁸

Furthermore, in 3:10-18 Paul quotes a number of Old Testament passages (or parts thereof)⁴⁹ in order to substantiate his claim about the universal nature of sin in v. 9, and in doing so, also highlights the extent to which man has gone in practicing evil.

6. *Approvers of Evil and Evil-doers (1:32)*

The human conscience has a built-in sense of right and wrong (morality), and all people are aware of the implicit penalty of doing evil. Not even the hardest criminal would

⁴⁵ As cited by Johnson, "God Gave Them Up", 129.

⁴⁶ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 2:69.

⁴⁷ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 113.

⁴⁸ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 2:69.

⁴⁹ Quotations (in order) are from Ps 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Ecc 7:20; Ps 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Isa 59:7-8; and Ps 36:1.

seriously question whether it is right to murder someone, or whether it is right to steal, since such a person would no doubt object to someone stealing from them, and they would surely resist someone attempting the murder them. People know full well that when they sin they are doing what is wrong, and 1:32 describes the blatant and wilful rebellion of man against God, despite the promptings of their conscience. Again, the use of the present tense for “continue to do” (Gk. *poiouein*) and “approve” (Gk. *suneudokousin*) indicates that this is a timeless truth.⁵⁰ Not only do people continue to do evil, they also encourage others to do the same. The homosexual lobby groups are highly “evangelistic” in their recruiting, by conning young males with low self-esteem who doubt their masculinity, into thinking they are latent homosexuals. Even many non-homosexuals actively endorse homosexual television programs, and parades and festivals glorifying homosexual perversity are celebrated and given massive media coverage. Yet, anyone who speaks out against this kind of activity is considered to be narrow-minded, intolerant and bigoted.

Note also that the reference to “death” denotes the penalty of sin in general. It is not a reference to the penalty of any of the particular sins mentioned.⁵¹

IV. CONCLUSION

The description of the status of humanity and the extent of our depravity as outlined by the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Romans is not at all pretty. Truth is suppressed, our thinking has become warped, we have rejected God in favour of our own idols, and we are spiralling out of control. Without God, humanity is destined for eternal judgement, and we are completely unable to help ourselves.

Only God can work to save humanity. Indeed, this is exactly what he did through His Son, Jesus Christ. Thank God for His patience and graciousness and taking the initiative by sending His own Son to die for all humanity, so that we may be restored to what God intended us to be. As Paul states in Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

⁵⁰ Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 115.

⁵¹ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 134.