

Man's Hopeless Condition

Romans 1:17—20

Paul has just introduced the Book of Romans by telling us that the information in this book will establish us in the faith. We become established through the knowledge and understanding of the Mystery doctrine that was revealed to the Apostle Paul by Jesus Christ. Many people today are looking at getting closer to God through a special, extra biblical experience. This is completely opposite of what Paul teaches. According to Paul, we are to know Him, not experience Him (Romans 15:4; Ephesians 1:17—18; Philippians 3:8—10; Colossians 1:10). It's important to understand that having zeal, and seeking experiences are worthless without proper knowledge (Romans 10:2). Most people settle for a good feeling toward God instead of a proper knowledge.

As we work our way through Romans, we will see Paul first building a case against all mankind, showing that we are all sinners and therefore completely hopeless. This is the first step we need to understand in order to realize we are all in need of a Savior.

Wrath of God (Verse 18)

Paul had just finished telling us, in verse 17, that God's righteousness is being revealed through the Gospel being preached by him. This Gospel is the power of God to all who believe. This gospel is being preached to all alike, both Jews and Gentiles, and gives salvation to all who believe, without distinction. Jews and Gentiles now come to God on an equal basis (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 3:11).

Having the Gentiles treated like the Jews was an amazing change in how God was dealing with mankind. When God was dealing with Israel, the Gentiles were left out in the cold, so to speak. They were able to come to God only by joining with the nation of Israel. They were without Christ, strangers from the covenants of promise and without hope (Ephesians 2:11—12). When Israel rejected the Kingdom by stoning Stephen, God raised up the Apostle Paul and revealed to him the Gospel of the Grace of God, the Mystery. This message, that Jesus Christ gave to Paul, was kept secret until revealed to him. This new doctrine put Gentiles and Jews on the same level (Ephesians 3:3—9). Before this, Gentiles were not free to come to God without going through Israel.

One side of the Gospel shows God's righteousness, while the other side shows His wrath. In His righteousness, God offers eternal life to all who believe. Those who reject God's offer will only experience wrath. Interestingly, verse 18 states that God's wrath IS being revealed from heaven. This wrath is against those who are ungodly and unrighteous, those who have rejected the truth. Just as God's righteousness is evident in His offer of salvation to all mankind, His wrath is also evident against all who reject His offer. God's righteousness and wrath are clearly revealed in His word, the Bible. As we read through to Romans 3:20, we can see God's wrath against unrighteousness. Verse 3:21 begins a change in tone with the phrase "but now." That little phrase gives mankind a glimmer of hope. It divides between the *times past* of God dealing exclusively with Israel to the *but now* of God's grace.

Times past

It is helpful to understand how Paul uses certain terms dispensationally. He often makes reference to changes using such terms as *times past*, *but now*, and, of course, the word *dispensation* (1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2; Colossians 1:25). The phrase *times past* can refer merely to a point of time in the past, but it is also used as a dispensational divider, separating one dispensation from another. Paul uses these terms to divide between God's plan for Israel and the Mystery given to the church. Let's look at some examples.

Romans 11:30 For as ye in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their unbelief:

This is an obvious reference to the past when God was dealing with Israel under the Prophetic program. Although many interpret this to mean that Paul was speaking of the time before the Gospel had gone to the

Gentiles, It is much more than that. From this verse (and the context) we see that Israel had failed in believing in the Messiah, and because they failed, the Gentiles were raised up, being placed on equal footing as the Jew. Recall that the Gentiles were never said to have equal status with Israel, but would be blessed through Israel. This indicates a dispensational change.

Ephesians 2:11—12 ¹¹Wherefore remember, that ye *being* in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; ¹²that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:

These verses also indicate a dispensational change by pointing out the condition of the Gentiles when God was dealing with Israel as a nation. Since God was dealing exclusively with Israel under Prophecy, the Gentiles were unable to come to God. Being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel made it impossible for them to come to God. Many people read these verses and assume Paul is talking about our condition before salvation. This cannot be since our relationship with Israel has nothing to do with our salvation.

According to Acts 17:30, the *times past* were a time of ignorance on the part of the Gentiles. They were worshipping graven images, but because they were done in ignorance, God overlooked these sins. It seems inconceivable that they didn't know that worshipping idols was wrong, however, this shows that God was dealing with Israel and not with the Gentile nations. Since they didn't know what God demanded, and didn't even know God, they were given a pass.

This time of ignorance is no longer in play now that God revealed the Mystery to Paul and the Gospel has been preached among the Gentiles. Again, the Gentiles were raised up to the same position as the Jew. Both groups have now received the gospel, and both groups are responsible to respond properly to it (Ephesians 2:13—18). The Gentiles can no longer claim ignorance. As Acts 14:16 states, in times past God allowed the Gentiles to walk in their own ways. Their sins were not held against them, although they will be judged at the Great White Throne by Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31; Revelation 20:11).

But now

But now is a phrase often used by the Apostle Paul, and is one that needs to be paid attention to in order to understand his writings. It is used in conjunction with, and in contrast to the phrase *times past* and often indicates a dispensational distinction. Here are some examples:

Ephesians 2:13 but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

As discussed above, this indicates the Gentile's status in this Dispensation of Grace. They were without hope previous to this time. This change is spoken of a number of times in the book of Romans (Romans 3:21; 7:6; 16:26).

Colossians 1:26 *even* the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

This verse also shows how Paul uses the phrase *but now* to create a dividing line between two programs, Israel and the Church. The Mystery was once hid, but now is made known to us through Paul.

No Excuse

Now that God is dealing with all mankind without distinction, we have no excuse for rejecting His offer of salvation. Even for those who do not have a Bible to read, God has given them His fingerprint in all of creation (Psalm 19:1). Seeing nature, and realizing there is a God, will not save a person, but if they accept the light given to them, I believe God will give them more light (John 1:4—5).

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