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The National Presbyterian Church

The Storm Before the Rain

Romans 1, 2 and 3

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We've been preaching on St. Paul's greatest book, the letter to the Romans. It's a book for our generation. And I do want to alert you to the fact that we have created a study guide. It's quite an extensive one. In fact, I've included bibliographic material here, other books to read and ways to study the book of Romans for yourself or in small groups. So these have been made available and they're on the literature table.

The book of Romans begins with St. Paul actually repeating the theology of the Ten Commandments which we read in Deuteronomy 5 and in Exodus 20 when the Ten Commandments are first presented. The Ten Commandments actually portray a view of who we are as human beings. We exist in terms of four fundamental relationships. And that is the way the Ten Commandments are written. First of all, to know who we are we need the upward line. The first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God. No other gods before you. It's by God's decision that we exist, no false gods, no empty gods.

And then the understanding of who we are portrayed in the fourth commandment. The fourth commandment is an amazing command. Our Lord said it was for us, not against us. It shows who we are in terms of our relationship with the earth, which is one of the fundamental relationships we have to have. We're not to worship crocodiles. We're to steward them. We don't worship the moon and sun. We steward it. And we live in a rhythmic

relationship with the week, every week six days thou shall labor, one day thou shall rest. And in the fourth commandment we're to be "rememberers." In the Exodus text we're to remember that God created us, and in Deuteronomy we're to remember that God redeemed us out of the bondage of Egypt. We're to be rememberers, in other words the whole commandment has to do with who we are, so that we'll know who we are.

And then the horizontal relationships, starting with the fifth commandment, honor thy father and mother. And then the sixth, thou shall not murder. Commandments five through ten deal with our relationship with the neighbor around us. We're not meant to live alone. We were meant to live in relationship with one another. And so the human being finds out who we are in terms of those four basic relationships. What then is the crisis for the human story? The crisis for human beings is when those relationships are broken or distorted.

And what we have in Romans 1 as we saw it last week, is it's as if it were a great courtroom where St. Paul plays the role of a prosecuting attorney. He stalks back and forth in this great courtroom and at the beginning of this book he sketches in for us the human crisis. He points out that the human crisis has to do with a break in these four relationships. "Though we knew God and knew who God was, we chose out of our desires to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images - icons representing man, birds, animals, snakes" (Romans 1:21-23). He sketches in the idolatries that we've taken on because of our desires. Rather than to worship God, we've chosen something else, and that becomes the human crisis - the breakdown of the upward line. Paul uses the word "exchange" - we desire our own gods and that brings confusion as to who we are. It's interesting that he uses our sexual nature as a way of describing that confusion; that when we follow our desires to give us the meaning to our existence, then we become sexually confused. Now it is my desire that defines me instead of God's decision about me.

And then horizontally. Here Paul has one of his famous lists. Only this time it's not a list we like, it's a list of sins. And he says we start by worshiping the idols instead of worshiping God. We become inwardly confused, and we start worshiping the earth and worshiping the animals of the earth instead of stewarding them, and then harm happens toward those around us. And that's the human crisis. We commit acts of wickedness. We do harm. And

that's his portrayal of the human crisis. But he's not finished.

He wants to point out that that crisis spreads. It has its own dynamic. It has its own cumulative power. The idolatries deteriorate. We started by worshipping man; we ended up worshipping the snake. The snake symbolizes what we fear. What an irony that we would bow before what we fear like Faust making a bargain with the Devil, hoping it will go well with him. The sins are a list that deteriorates too. It starts out with wickedness but it ends up with we not only do these things, we approve those to do these things. That's the bottom of that list. Is Paul thinking of the Roman arena? He lived during the time of Nero. He's aware of the gladiator games, of the crowd's love of blood. Is that what he's talking about? We not only do harm but we approve it when we see it happen.

It's a tragic story. It's a crisis. And Paul is a prosecutor showing us this guilt that we have and suffer from. Now in Chapters 2 and 3 he shows that the guilt spreads. And whoever we are, if we think that we're above it all, that we are morally superior and remember in the Greek world people who were philosophically stoic would feel that they were superior to others. Or if we're Jews and we pride ourselves on knowing the Law and the covenants, therefore we're better than everyone else. Paul is going to play this role now in Chapters 2 and 3. He's going to show that the guilt spreads regardless of who you are. Listen to Chapter 2.

"Therefore you have no excuse whoever you are when you judge another. For in passing judgment", [In other words, I feel now superior to someone so I'm going to judge them.] "In passing judgment on someone else you condemn yourself because you the judge are doing the same things" (Romans 2:1). Those of stoic philosophy who look down on everyone else, but you do the same thing that you're accusing them of. They may know the Ten Commandments but they still judge others. It was once said, "It may not be universally wrong to steal, but it's universally wrong to be stolen from."¹ And so I steal, but don't you steal from me. And so the minute I say, "Don't steal from me," I'm then guilty. Even though I see myself as superior to you. So that's how he starts.

And then he takes on his own people, the Jews. Listen to this, verse 17.

But what if you call yourself a Jew and you rely on the Law, [remember, the Law that we just heard quoted in Deuteronomy 4], and you boast of your

relationship with God? And you know his will and you determine what is best because you're instructed by the Law. And if you are sure that you're a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, you see yourself as a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children having the Law, the embodiment of knowledge and truth, but then you who teach others, will you teach yourselves? [Paul is pouring it on now.] While you preach against stealing, do you steal? (Romans 2:17-21).

And he's including himself.

As a matter of fact, it's interesting how the total passage progresses. Chapter 1 *is they* are without excuse, referring in sort of general terms. And then he starts Chapter 2, we notice it's intensifying, for when *you* judge others, you're guilty." And then *we, we* Jews who have the Law [and Paul's a Jew, he has the Law], when we use the Law against others, but yet we are still not obeying the Law, so we're no better. And then finally in one poignant moment, a little later he says, "And why am *I* still being condemned?" (Romans 3:7). He includes himself as well. No, he casts a net that's getting bigger and bigger as a prosecutor. What then, are we any better off [referring to himself] as a Jew? No not at all. This is Verse 9 now in Chapter 3, he says, "No, not at all. For I have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, we are all under the power of sin. None of us is righteous" (Romans 3:9). No, not one.

So Paul is sketching in a cumulative crisis and it doesn't stay put. It grows in intensity. The idolatries get worse, the sins get worse, but the guilt spreads as well. Next week we'll see that he strides across the courtroom and becomes suddenly by surprise the defense attorney, but not yet. Right now he's the prosecutor. We are all guilty, we are all in it together, and in this he has made one more point. All the ways we choose to try to solve this crisis have failed us. By blaming others, is that supposed to help us? It doesn't help. Or the Law hasn't helped us. And so all the methods we've used to solve the crisis on our own have not worked.

I have tried to think of a way to illustrate this. If you'll permit me, I came up with a kind of whimsical illustration. It's kind of humorous in a way. See if I can explain Paul's point here. Imagine that you were working in a company and there were three of you in the office and you won a contest. And the contest was that the three of you have won a free trip to Hawaii. And it's

on one of the big Holland America Lines, from San Francisco to Honolulu, and you get to go free of charge because you won the contest. So the three of you board the ship in San Francisco and you're about a day out at sea, the first night's been fun with all of the parties that are on board the ship and you're just having a great time, the three of you. And then one of your office mates says, "Hey, we ought to take a picture to preserve this, so we can go back and show it to the other guys in the office so they can see what they missed." And so yes, that's a good idea, we'll take a picture. And so you're standing on the deck, you find a passenger that'd be willing to take a picture of you fellows. Three of you are standing there.

What you don't know is that the crew has removed the railing for repairs. Remember the old Red Skelton slapstick sketch when he is taking a picture of his friend on the Eiffel Tower? He says, "Just step back a little bit I can't quite get you in focus yet ... one more step back and I'll get you ... whoops." And then the guy goes over and down the Eiffel Tower. Well, imagine that happening on this ship. You don't realize the crew has removed the railing temporarily for repairs. You're standing there and the random person on board is taking a picture of you. And he says just like Red Skelton, "Just step back one more step, I can't quite get you guys in. One more step back...Oops. Wow, that's too bad." And then you, the three of you fall in the water and this guy did not press the persons overboard button, so you're in the water and the ship continues its way to Hawaii.

I'm only going to ask one question of this parable. This is a crisis parable. And I'm going to ask one question of the parable in light of what Paul has taught us in Romans, Chapters 1 through 3. And that is: What won't help you now? What's not helpful now? You've got three guys that have just fallen into the water. One of them was very fond of his idol Diana. You know the Romans adopted the Greek god Artimus and turned Artimus into Diana. Diana statues were sold throughout the world in the first century. They were made in Ephesus. So he had his statue of Diana. That's his idol and it means a great deal to him. And he took it on the trip, and when the picture idea came up he says, "Oh fellas, before we take the picture I've got to go and get my statue of Diana. I'm never photographed without my statue of Diana." So he runs into the stateroom and gets his statue of Diana. He's standing there with his statue of Diana being photographed because he's never photographed without it. And then each of you step back ... wow. You fall into the water. Let me analyze him first because he's in a tough spot. He's in

the water. He probably says as he lands in the water, "I'm awfully glad I had the presence of mind to get Diana for this. Of course she weighs 38 pounds and she is a fertility god and that's not exactly what my need is right now. If I was planting crops that would be different. Then I'd want Diana. But I'm in the water and she's a little bit irrelevant to this water crisis." See, I'm making a joke of it but, you know, St. Paul does the same thing when he quotes the Book of Wisdom that says, take your idols, speak to them and see if they speak back to you. You ask favors of them, see if they give you the favors. They can't. They're covered with gold but they can't speak. They're dead. And in a way, Diana... I have a feeling that this guy is going to drop Diana quite quickly. She is not relevant now. That's the problem with idols. Idols are not relevant to solve the biggest crisis. And the biggest crisis is that they're in the water and the ship has gone on. Okay, that's my first man.

The second man is my moral superiority man. He's the man we met in Chapter 2. "And you, when you blame others and accuse others of being at fault but you are not, you're no better because you're the same thing." (Romans 2:1). Paul takes them on right away. When you judge others, what right do you have to judge others? You're also in the same thing with them. Your moral superiority man is probably the guy that's been working out at swimming to get ready for the trip to Hawaii because he wants to surf, and he wants to really be in top physical condition for this trip. And where the other guys have been eating a lot at the banquet table there in the ship, he is staying trim. And now he's in the water and he's probably a little self-righteous. When he falls in the water he might say now, "You guys, you should have been swimming like I've been swimming. I have been working out, I've done lots of laps. I can do three hours of laps and I'm in great shape. I know you guys are not. And so I'm not going to stay around with you guys, I'm going to head off. And I will give you advice. Sidestroke is probably better for long distance swimming. But I'm going now, I can't wait around for you guys. Besides what a mess you are, you've been fooling around all this time and I've been practicing. By the way, which way is San Francisco?" And he would start to swim. But you've all seen "Jaws," and so you know that he's not going to last long, not to mention hypothermia setting in. That's the person Paul takes on in Chapter 2.

Now what about the legalist? Paul says we Jews, we have the Law. But we're also in deep with a big problem too. I'm going to say that that's the guy

that's been in the chartroom on the whole trip so far. The other guys were out, carousing and having a lot of fun at the dinner, but he has been in the map room on the ship because he's very interested in maps. And he's able to say when they land in the water, "You know you guys, I was in the map room just before this silly picture was organized. And I want you to know we are right now 1,460 miles from San Francisco, I just checked." Notice that's an interesting piece of information. It's accurate. It's true, but it's not helpful. It helps us understand what Paul meant when he later will say, "The Law increases the trespass" (Romans 5:20). When the Law appears it makes you realize how bad we really are. It doesn't help you. And that's what the map man does. And that's what the Law does. The Law actually makes it worse, because it can't cure us. It just shows us how big our crisis is. Luther once described the Law as like "A mirror that you see your face in, but you can't wash your face with a mirror, it just shows you how dirty your face is. But the cleaning needs something else."²

So there are my three men in the water. One who's got an idol; he's dropped that right away. The strong swimmer, but we know he can't make it. The man with the maps; he knows how bad the crisis is, but still no help. What do we need? We need something that is able to do two things. We need something that is able to heal brokenness, because at the heart of the human crisis is brokenness, caused by our runaway desires. Our runaway desires have fouled us up and caused us to choose idols, caused us to focus wrongly on ourselves, and we've done harm to our neighbors. And our brokenness is our problem. So we need a solution that's able to heal brokenness.

And secondly, we need a solution that's able to outdistance a crisis that's accumulating in intensity. The crisis is getting stronger and we need a solution stronger than the crisis itself. What is the answer? Next week is Pentecost Sunday. You're going to hear the answer next week because right in the middle of this courtroom scene, Paul will move across the stage and he will become the defense attorney. He'll say that in the middle of all these things, God has acted by surprise. And that's what we're going to see.

Remember how the book of Romans began? It began with the surprise right at the beginning. Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel, the good news. It's the power of God for salvation." (Now the word "salvation" means to be made safe, to be healed.) "It's the power of God for salvation. To everyone who has faith, everyone who repents, everyone who has faith, the Jew first,

also the Greek, for in it the righteous character of God has broken through by surprise. His faithfulness, His grace for our faith. As it is written, "The just shall live by the faithfulness of God" (Romans 1:16-17). That's how Paul started the book of Romans, and you'll see that's the radical interruption that's going to heal us in the midst of our crisis.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this. We thank you that it's still true, that we can receive this grace right today. We can receive this help, this healing, this cumulative power that's able to outdistance the crisis. We can receive it right now because of your grace. Thank you, Lord, for the Good News. We're not sure that we wanted to hear the prosecution, but now that we've heard it, we know that we need your help. And Lord, thank you that your help is there. In Christ's name, Amen.

1 Lewis, D.S. *Mere Christianity*. MacMillan, 1952.

2 Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Romans*. 1515 (Kregel Classics, 2003).

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
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