

What May Be Known About God (2)

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[0 : 00] Two weeks ago, Corry preached from verse 18, 16 and 17, where Paul begins this section by saying, For I am not ashamed of the gospel.

And I hope that's the testimony of all of us as Christians here today. We're not ashamed, are we? We're not ashamed of the gospel, are we? I wonder if this chapter, I wonder if this passage will test that in reality for us.

I wonder if we really understand how bad our situation is without Jesus Christ. We say a lot, we know a lot, but I certainly appreciate how little I understand of my condition naturally without Jesus Christ, as God sees me, and how great His salvation is.

I don't think I even begin to grasp that reality. I see glimpses maybe from now and again in my own heart, and as I seek God's mind. But I don't think any of us, probably if we're honest with each other, see things as God sees them and sees our heart and our need as God sees it.

We talk often about being rescued, about being saved, redeemed, released, and the question must always be, from what?

[1 : 23] From what is it that we feel rescued and redeemed? It has to be a grim situation before we recognize our need for being brought out of it, doesn't it?

Otherwise it's no big deal. Jesus is no big deal for us. If the rescue and the redemption and the salvation and the release isn't really that significant, then we can take or leave Jesus, can't we? He's someone we can throw aside as we want. And so it's hugely significant for us to think God thoughts, which is what the Bible is.

It's God giving us His thoughts and is expressing our need and His salvation. It's that amazing mixture. And at the core of our need, as this passage unfolds, is very stark.

The core of the need of humanity of individuals, and don't just leave it at the kind of broad term of humanity. Take it into your own heart.

[2 : 33] I must take it into mine, is that without Christ we simply don't want God. We don't want Him. We reject Him.

We will worship. We don't want to worship Him. We don't want to serve Him. We don't like His verdict. We are uncomfortable with the diagnosis. So as you looked at last week, humanity suppresses God.

Suppresses that knowledge of God, keeps it down. It's a very strong word. It speaks of strong physical resistance, deliberate and active suppression of God.

We don't like Him. We don't like what He says, we hate His verdict, and we are uncomfortable with His justice. So what does it look like? Well, it looks like it.

Verse 23, as you saw last week, is that we will adore, we will worship anything but God. They exchanged the glory of God and worshiped created things rather than the Creator.

[3 : 35] So we adore, we put first anything other than God. Verse 25 says that we exchanged the truth of God for a lie, so that we choose not to accept what God says.

Right from the very beginning, did God really say? Is that right? We question Him and we are deceived by lies. And in verse 28, the third thing that this passage says is that we don't see fit to acknowledge God in our thoughts at all.

We just get rid of God's thoughts. There's this threefold condition that is unpacked in these verses, that there's this unnatural antagonism towards God, and I think that's clear to us all, isn't it?

Is it clear to you as a Christian? It's certainly clear to me that I face a battle on a daily basis to not have other things first in my life other than God. There's many times I look at God's Word and I question it, and there's doubt there.

And so often I will find after hours and hours that I've had no thoughts for God, no thoughts for His Word, no thoughts for His character, and He has pushed out, and that is the battle that we often face as Christians.

[4 : 51] And maybe if you're not a Christian here today, you can recognize that same reality in your life that you push God aside, you doubt His Word. There are other things that are more important that come first in your life.

And in the whole world in which we live, we see that, don't we? We see that rejection, that suppression, that unbelief, so that in most scenarios of life, God is not Mr. Popular. He is not the God that people want. And there is, if we are honest, an irrational hatred that seems to well up within people who choose to reject God.

So I want to look in specific terms at how that reveals itself in this passage as God is diagnosing the world in which we live and diagnosing our own hearts as well.

When God is pushed out, when God is rejected, when He is doubted, when He is cast aside, when He is no longer worshiped, there are two specific things in this passage that we see happening.

[6 : 01] There is firstly the unleashing of the body, and then we see there's the unleashing of the mind. There's the unleashing of the body in verses 24 to 27.

Speak about that. It's very physical, speaking about the body and particularly speaking about sexuality in verses 24 to 27. And that comes from exchanging, it's this exchange that's going on again, exchanging God's way for our own way, exchanging God's truth for our own truth.

And it means that there's, I maybe I should use inverted commons, the unleashing of the body. So the physicality of humanity unrestrained and unconstrained by ideas of God, with all the narrow constrictions of sexuality within God given parameters, abandoned, with the freedom from the idea that men and women are created for each other, and that sexual pleasure is to be enjoyed within the confines of a trusting, faithful, humble, sacrificial relationship of marriage.

Free from the whole notion that children are a great blessing in such faithful, monogamous relationships, where free from the concept of them being valued and protected and safe in the womb, from destruction from outside.

Free from all of these things, the result is a sexuality that is purely a matter for the individual. God is pushed aside. God is abandoned.

[7 : 39] God is rejected. God is not worshiped. His truth is a lie. Everything is turned on its head, and God has no place in the pursuit of pleasure, physical pleasure particularly, and physical sexual pleasure particularly, which is dealt with in this passage.

So there's a movement of the sexual act, excuse my explicit language today, into the realm of merely a biological function, removing it from the diversity of gender and from the confines of monogamy, from the significance of procreation, and releasing it into the service of disordered loves at best, and sheer unrestrained passion at worst.

So we see in the world in which we live that dumping God out of the picture is seen as life's great aphrodisiac. It's the best possible thing for sexual liberty and freedom.

Dump God out of the picture. Get rid of Him, and we can all enjoy the freedom of our bodies as we were intended to enjoy them. The unique biblical concept of marital sexual love between opposite genders in all its diversity is taken, and it's mimicked within the same gender, where sexual activity becomes damaging, and separated from its original intent, which is the fusion of opposites, the coming together of two different peoples, different genders in one physical and spiritual union, with all its complexity and all its mystery and all its adventure.

Now can I say at this point, this is not in any way a condemnation of same-sex attraction, nor indeed of the ongoing temptations that we all face sexually in our lives.

[9 : 49] This is a broken moral world that we live in, and we battle against these realities all the time. Each of us has different struggles sexually in our lives.

Some it may be same-sex attraction, for others it may be a whole myriad of different issues that we face. And it's true, I imagine, in this particular group of people as we come together, that all of us in one degree or another are struggling with loneliness, singleness, marriage, maybe singleness or loneliness within marriage, faithfulness, overcoming lust, rejecting pornography, understanding our sexuality as God intends us to do, dealing with all the deep-seated and competing desires we have in the confusing emotions that we sometimes think nobody else has but us.

And so we are called, remember this, we are called to make this gospel community a safe place, a good place, a place of love and of understanding that's supportive and non-judgmental on these issues, faithful to God in all his grace and justice, but hugely accepting and loving and understanding and generous.

I pray about generosity. If we don't understand grace, if we don't understand our own hearts, we will never be generous, spirited, I mean.

We will always be mean-spirited, always finding fault, always looking morally and self-righteously to the failings of others.

[11 : 48] Grasp generosity, grasp grace, grasp our own need of his generosity, and it will change the way we look at other people.

And it will change our attitude to the perceived failings we see in others and maybe focus the attention more on the real failings that we ourselves need forgiven from, moved from and transported and transformed towards the living God.

This is not about condemnation of any of these things. This is very much, particularly this section is about the place of active physical sex within God's universe and the rejection of God and his morality consciously, willingly and deliberately so that its passions can be satisfied without restriction, without reference to God in the equation.

And you know, and I know, that leaves Christianity today beyond the pale for the majority of society and for the majority of the world we live in.

More Christianity in mind is beyond the pale because of this model of morality and physicality and sexuality that is given.

[13 : 13] Many different interpretations are given to change, to fuse it with today's thinking, none of which are faithful to God in His Word.

So there's the unleashing of the body. But there's also, secondly, the unleashing of the mind, as it were, from verses 28 to 32, since they do not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

So it's speaking about the mind, but the fruit is activity. It's about action. But it is, I'm using that, the unleashing of the mind. So there's this, twice it speaks about the exchange, the exchanging of truth of God for a lie and the exchanging of the worship of God for idolatry, and that this exchange has gone on.

And God is pushed out of the mind as well as the body and all that it stands for. So humanity rejects God's mind and all the narrow-mindedness and the restrictions that are perceived to belong to God. We've ditched the concept of absolute truth and any sense of accountability beyond accountability to one another in society.

[14 : 38] The rejection of all the Judeo-Christian foundations, which allows, as God has thrown out of the mind and thrown out of the intellect, allows independence and an inverted commas reason and scientific ideology to formulate a new fluid morality.

There's the rejection of needing to know God at all. Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, gave them up to, they were filled with all manner of unrighteousness.

They simply didn't feel the need to acknowledge God. So there's a rejection of the knowledge of God.

And what's the reality of that? What's the reality of that in the world in which we live and in our hearts? The result is where God is abandoned, we're all gods.

Isn't that what happens? When we throw God out, we all become gods. We all become sovereign over our own lives. Isn't that the great mantra of today?

[15 : 48] I am my own person. I make my own decisions. And that is lauded and that is worshiped and recognized.

We all become gods when God is taken out of the picture. And that leads to a survival of the fittest mentality. We live in a world where equality reigns, where materialism drives the human heart, where life itself is stripped of its value at either end of the spectrum, within the womb and beyond the pensionable age.

Life is cheapened. Ways are looked at to dissolve and to get rid of life. Searing poverty covers half the globe in which we live.

Authority is rejected. Loyalty and faithfulness is sneered at. The individual is king. We are all gods. And the freedom that we believe we have has enslaved us.

Look at the characteristics of these verses. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetous, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, hotty, boastful, inventors of evil, ruthless.

[17:04] Twenty-one different characteristics that are repeated at different places in the Bible that characterize, not exclusively, but do characterize the world in which we live.

And the reason given is that they have chosen, humanity has chosen to leave. He isn't, God is not worth thinking about. God is not worth having in the mind. And therefore the freedom all to be gods brings this reality into the world in which we live, and lest we become complacent and judgmental into our own hearts, to a greater or lesser degree.

Let not anyone here stand in judgment, but let us all look at our own hearts. Because the question then becomes, as we seek to draw it together, where is God?

Where is God in this bleak picture? I haven't painted a very attractive painting of the world in which we live, nor of myself, nor of our own hearts.

And I don't think we like to talk about it very much. I'm sure some of you are fairly uncomfortable this morning and are longing for the sermon to end. We don't analyze.

[18:17] We don't want to consider the world in which we live. We don't want to consider its injustices. And more significantly, we probably don't like the mirror of Scripture exposing what we might feel conscience-prick this morning in our own hearts.

It's ugly, isn't it? It's uncomfortable. So what do we do? We suppress it. We take our physical, mental and spiritual energy and we shh, we suppress it.

We decide not to think about it. We move our minds somewhere else. Think about how blissful it will be half an hour from now and how I can just put these thoughts out of my life and out of my heart.

We shut our Bibles. We don't listen to our conscience because God makes us uncomfortable.

So God makes us uncomfortable. Where is He in this? Well, can I say He's intimately involved in this? He's intimately involved.

[19:27] That might be a strange thing for us to say. What? How can that be? How can God be involved intimately in this mess? Well, can I argue that He's involved in three ways in this world in which we live?

The first is He's involved in judgment. Now, Corey spoke about that last week. That's really the domain of the previous section. For the wrath of God, verse 18, is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

So we saw that last week, didn't we? He's involved in judgment. So the world is already, God is involved in discipline and in judgment because He is just and perfect.

And that's the story of the whole Bible. We're in a mess. And part of that mess is of God's making in the sense that He has brought His anger, His wrath down upon us because we are accountable to Him and there has been a downright rebellion against His lordship.

We've rejected the author and the giver of life who every day has allowed you to breathe the air that you breathe in your nostrils as you've come here. There's been a coup d'etat.

[20:44] There's been a takeover. We've taken the rightful place of God and He is punishing humanity and us individually for that. We are separated from Him. We are dead spiritually and dying naturally.

He is involved in judgment. But what does that mean? What does that mean as it's unpacked here? In what way? Well, if you've looked at this section, you may have noticed there are some things are repeated, repeating things are always good.

And three times it says God gave them up or gave them over. Verse 24, God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts. 26, God gave them up to dishonorable passions.

And verse 28, God gave them up to a debased mind. So that is how God is involved in judgment.

We talked earlier, didn't we, about the exchange going on, the humanity exchange, the truth of God for a lie.

The exchange, the worship of God for the worship of humanity. Well, this is another exchange going on. The other way. And God is also exchanging. He's handing over both, and I believe there's both a passive and an active sense in which He is doing so.

[21:54] God is in effect saying, and I hope I say this reverently, okay, this is what you want. Here is your freedom.

You've wanted rejection. You've wanted me out of the picture. This is not what I want for you, but you make the choice. The choice will often lead to misery in your life and degradation and disaster ultimately.

But I'm handing it over to you. It's your choice. This is what you want. He's saying, look, you make terrible gods, because you're all gods and all competing with one another.

And your choices will make terrible masters, terrible lords. But this is what you want. I'm handing it over to you. It's judgment. I'm giving you what you want. Your independence is slavery, but I want you to see that.

There's both a passive handing over, but an active judgment within it. And I was wrestling with how to try and illustrate that. I couldn't think of any modern day illustration in any way that would parallel.

[22 : 58] The only thing I could think of was the prodigal son. In a sense, it's the mindset of the father, isn't it? The son says, I want you dead, dad, and I want your money.

I want your inheritance. I don't want you. I don't want your fatherly care or love, but I just want the money that will come to me as if you were dead, and I just want to spend it.

And the father gives him it. It's the wrong choice. But he gives him his inheritance, and he probably says, I know that this is the wrong choice, but I'm going to let you make it.

And he lets him go. He knew it would be a disaster. He knew it would be enslaving for him. He knew it would be full of unfulfilled promise. But even in judgment, here there is grace, because it wasn't it so that he would come to his senses.

And isn't that in the sense why God gives us over so that we will come to our senses and see we make bad gods? We make bad choices without him.

[23 : 59] He's our loving father. He's just, but he's given us freedom. And we've chosen the path of freedom without him. So he's involved in that sense in judgment and giving over.

But can I also say he's involved in another way in common grace? The last verse says, therefore, that though they know God's righteous decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die.

Not only do they do them, and you could translate that, that they continue to do them, but give approval to those who practice. There's a sense in which God allows things to continue.

And in chapter two, if you look over in verse four, it says, do you not, don't presume when the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.

So there's this sense that God, even in the mess of this world, is involved in grace. He allows the world to continue. In 2 Peter 3, 9, the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness.

[25 : 00] And he's patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. So he lets people, he lets your husband and wife, your neighbor, your son, your daughter, your colleague at work, he lets them wake up every day.

He sends the sun and the rain in them. He gives them love and laughter and marriage and friendship and family and work and life, even though they never acknowledge him, even though they may never consider him.

We live in a world where people are creative, where there is beautiful humanitarian acts that are done, where people are faithful and loving in different relationships, upright and moral in the business place, where many unbelievers are nicer than Christians.

We know that, don't we? Any of them are nicer, where the gay community has so many lessons to teach us from which we can learn. The reason God doesn't bring eternal death to all every living creature is because he is God who is both and loving and just.

Together, they fuse together in his glory and in his perfection. In many ways we seek, we don't understand. So he is intimately involved in judgment, in common grace and in incarnation.

[26 : 23] That is how he is most involved. He's most involved. And that takes us right back to the beginning. I'm not ashamed of the gospel. What is the gospel?

It's where God involves himself in a world that has rejected him and abandoned him and pushed him out. He comes into the arena of his own judgment.

He experiences life in the trenches, breathes the dirtied air of a world that has rejected him and doesn't want him.

God comes in among all the pseudo-Gods, and he comes to reveal himself. For 33 years, he's gentle and strong, living in enemy territory, living as one who knows rejection and despite.

And the greatest guilt of the human race is when they take the one man, the one human being that ever lived a perfect life, inwardly and outwardly, pleasing God and loving his neighbor and nailed him to a cross.

[27 : 42] That's the ultimate judgment on humanity, that they took the only perfect human being and said, we don't want this. We don't like this.

We want to be gods, and we don't want this God. And they nailed him to a tree. And isn't the greatest irony of all that in that ultimate rejection, that is the path that God himself chose to be the answer to the rejection.

Because in doing so, he takes our place, and he takes all of God's wrath on himself, all the forsakenness, all the just anger, all the assault of hell, drained it dry on the cross, in the place of all who will accept his gift of righteousness through the gospel, a new righteousness that is not ourselves, not our own good works, but a gift.

Gift. Can you imagine giving a gift to someone who has spent their lives hating you and rejecting you? And yet that is the grace of God, he says, paid and fooled.

And what is it? It's another exchange. It's another exchange. He says, I take your guilt. I take all that you can't do.

[29 : 18] And you take all that I've done. So that in the power of God, by the Spirit of God, as we are reborn by God, we can do all these things that sin stops us doing.

We can worship Him, put Him first. We can believe the truth and not be deceived by the lie.

And we can retain and look for the knowledge of God and not throw aside as being insignificant and unimportant. That is the gospel.

There's great mystery there. There's great depth that we can't, I can't even begin to plumb. But let us not do the disservice of treating the gospel cheaply or lightly or insignificantly or casting God aside and saying, it's irrelevant for today or it's not the moral liberalism that we've come to believe and understand and know and see.

But let us look with God's eyes and let us see His grace and His wholeness. And may He change your heart and mind.

[30 : 31] If you're not a Christian today, can I ask you to consider this diagnosis that God makes and see if you can see its truth reflected in your heart.

Because Christians, let's not be self-righteous and let us not think we are better than we are. But may that not paralyze us.

But may we move beyond it into seeing the impossible realities of becoming children of God and what that means being filled with the Spirit and the power of the risen Savior.

Amen. Let's pray briefly. Father God, we thank You for who You are. Forgive us for not understanding You properly.

Help us to reflect You simply. Grant us wisdom. Protect us from the evil one and His deceit and His lies.

[31 : 32] Keep us from seeking, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to be God's, which we so often do in our lives. So often see a world that revolves around us.

We see problems revolving around us. It's all about us because we are on the throne. Lord, help us to see the freedom that comes from recognizing who You are and what You have done for us at the extent and the glory of the cross and the resurrection and the promises of God.

May we plead them and live them today and in the days that lie ahead. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.