

The Depths of Man's Sinful Condition

Romans 3⁹⁻¹⁸

The deepest spot on the earth is believed to be in the ocean south of Japan in what is called the Mariana Trench, in a place called Challenger Deep – named after the vessel which first sought to plumb its 36,070 feet in 1875.

Challenger is over 7 miles deep!

What that means is that this spot is lower in the earth than Mt. Everest is high! If you were to put Everest to the bottom of Challenger's depth, you could still put a mountain just over 7000 feet tall on top of it to reach the ocean's surface.

Or think of it this way: the next time you are flying a commercial jet and cruising at the altitude of 35,000 feet, look down, and that is almost but not quite the depth of how far down the bottom is of Challenger Deep.

Travel mile after mile after mile after mile after mile to the bottom, as was first done in 1960 and more recently in 2012, and you will find the pressures there astronomical: over 15000 pounds per square inch – 7 ½ tons!

That, to me, seems about the best illustration, the best comparison, of the awful weight before us in Romans 3:9-18 today.

Verse 9 says all – Jew and Greek alike – are UNDER sin; verse 19 says literally, those who are IN the Law. And everything between is this tremendous depth.

We need no submarine to get there, for we are there. We are, by nature, fallen and fallen deeply.

We are picking up where we left off last time, as there is a clear shift in Paul's description.

Verses 10-12 has more of legal court feel – these are charges against mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, establishing our guilt. We are condemned by the law like a criminal before the judge of all the earth.

But with verse 13-18, we find more a description of an autopsy, and we have moved to the morgue.

This fits with what Paul said back in Romans 1 – man's problems have to do with both unrighteousness and ungodliness – we are guilty and we are depraved; condemned in sin and corrupted by sin.

Notice the first and last items overall – none righteous, and none who fear God – unrighteousness and ungodliness.

We had seen one, two, three last time, if you recall –

One all encompassing description – none righteous, no, not one!

Two qualities of man's thinking – his knowledge or understanding is used against God, and God is not sought and loved with all his mind.

Three things about his path – verse 12 – he walks astray, he does no good, and this is universal – no one of all Adam's children is not lost!

We come then to verse 13-14, to four items about his speech, his words.

I hope you will understand after looking closely here why God would have us with closed mouths in verse 19. For when we open the mouth

of a sinner, and like a doctor tells a patient to stick out his tongue and say “ah” – what do we find here? The very stench of a dead body! An open grave, and what are these squirming worms but lying tongues? And under the worms is a snake, a cobra comes forth from his mouth with poison. And now a great belch from the throat of cursing and bitterness!

Close that up! Hold your nose! Don’t get too close this bad and deadly breath!

Paul begins likening our mouths to a grave – wow!

Proverbs 18 says that death and life are in the power of the tongue; and a good tongue produces good and satisfying fruit.

But there is nothing like that here! It is a hole but not for fruit tree, but for dead bodies! Corpses!

Paul says to the Ephesians that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Well that shows in how we think and feel, how we act and react. But especially is it seen in our words.

Out the fullness the heart the mouth speaks, and as a man thinks in his heart, so is he. This man’s throat is gross! Death is there.

And if we were to put a gravestone over it, the tongue would read: ‘Here lies a fallen sinner who cannot rest in peace.’

But instead, the tongue connected to this throat spews out what his heart is thinking on all the time.

Untruth, deception, lying lips is the next quality next to the bad breath of the grave.

I wonder: how many lies are told in this world, every day, every hour, every minute?

Have you seen these digital clocks on the internet which keep pace with our national debt? We are heading toward 22 trillion dollars in the hole and still digging!

What would man's lying clock look like!

And as if that were not enough, we have number three: the poison of an asp is here. The venom of a cobra is one of the most powerful poisons in the world. One pin prick drops a man in a matter of minutes. This is potent, deadly.

What Paul is describing as he now shifts his quote from Psalm 5 to Psalm 140, is that the effects of man's evil speech, lies and deceptions on his fellow man.

In the OT, we hear of priests speaking lies and the people loving it to be so. And in the NT, we hear of women who are gullible, and men love to deceive them. Or bring it into our families, where children come forth from the womb speaking lies, and by adulthood, their own father and mother cannot believe a word that comes out of them! So they simply turn a deaf ear.

Now we come to the 4th description of the mouth. We shouldn't be surprised with a grave throat, lying tongue and lips of cobra venom, that the words are going to be very, very bad.

You don't gather grapes from a thistle, nor do figs grow on thorn bushes. Make the tree good and the fruit will be good; but a bad tree only produces bad fruit.

The mouth of man was formed to be filled with sweet and good things; things that were wholesome, true, right, and holy; lips which were to kiss the Son, to praise with the angels, to bless the Lord.

But instead of overflowing or abounding like a cornucopia – the sewage of cursing has replaced blessing, and the vile refuse of bitterness chokes out all the sugar of heaven on the lips.

Nothing sweet comes from the grave.

James 3 might be a good passage for you to read this holy day, where the tongue of man is a small little part of the body, but what great evil and damage it can do! A whole hell is found in the tongue! And the Lord has promised – every secret and stray word that has been spoken will be brought into judgment!

No wonder we should be quick to hear and slow to speak. God has given you twice the number of ears as he has given you a mouth!

The last five elements then in 15-18 touches on the actual deeds of men.

Be reminded of this fact: what a man does in a way of evil is not so great as what is in his heart to do. Thankfully men cannot do all that they want to do in their sinful ways. They are restrained in several ways. He cannot live up to himself.

That means that even men like Hitler or Mao were not as evil as they wanted to be, and would have carried their violence to the whole world if they could.

This is why it is so necessary to be able to defend yourself.

Paul begins by quoting now from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 59, detailing how wicked Israel (not the Gentiles) had become violent, and walked in bloody ways.

Notice how their feet not only shed blood, but are swift to do so. This speaks to how eager they are in it, how practiced at it, how easy it is for them to walk in such intention and zeal for evil.

Verse 16 speaks of the two effects – his 2nd and 3rd qualities here – destruction and misery. The first is the damage done by their actions. And the second is the pain caused by men against men. The first speaks of the sin done and the lives brutalized; the second is the miserable condition brought on by those who are hurt, and the sorrow that is caused.

O what a wake of wreckage follows the path of men! Filled with blood, death, and wounds which will never heal! This is so literally and figuratively. Think of the World Wars we have been in! Think of the religious wars of a previous day! It was said of the slaughter of Protestants in France that there was enough blood shed to float the Armada – the largest navy the world had ever seen!

Then what a mixture of hatred, blood, damage and tears! And all against the backdrop of what we once were made to be! The whole world had been intended to become one large Garden of Eden, a Garden of God. But we have made it a wilderness, harsh and cruel, crawling with chaos and mayhem.

Verse 17 is the flip side of 16 – where there is this bloody march, there is no peace, no wholeness, and no God to crown our path. Peace, or shalome, does not mean merely the absence of war; it means the

presence of wholeness which comes from God alone. So men without God are utterly unfamiliar with what true peace is; the gospel through Jesus Christ, who rightly and fully bears the title for all to hear: “Prince of Peace” – He alone restores, makes complete, brings full satisfaction in Himself. That is true peace, and worthy of the name.

How empty we are without the Lord. We don’t have peace in us naturally anymore. Isaiah likens man to an angry ocean, whose waves stir up the muck and mire on the bottom of our filthy hearts.

But the good news is what Jesus does and says – “My peace I give to you – not as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled nor let it be fearful!” John 14

This brings us to the 5th and final quality of man’s ways; a crowning statement of life and walk that covers everything. This is a good place to end.

Quoting now from Psalm 36:1, that transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart, There is no fear of God before his eyes. This bring us back full circle to Psalm 14 quoted at the beginning, ‘The fool has said in his heart, there is no God.’

The absence of this fear means, as one writer put it, the exclusion of God not only from the *center* of thought and calculation but from the whole horizon of our outlooks. This spells out unqualified godlessness. We banish him from the horizon of our world, and then we wonder why we find ourselves in the depths of his disfavor!

Man is sinfully opposite to what the fear of God entails is all about.

We must confess that the term ‘fear of God’ is not a warm and welcoming phrase. But a term must be defined. And this term is a rich one, which we miss to our own great loss.

The fear of God is a full, rich, and wonderful idea in the Bible. There is not one definition that fits all its uses.

It begins with reverence for God; the fear of God means that the Lord is to me first, best, greatest and highest. Godly fear counts God as God in a full way.

This in turn must include the devotion and worship that is his. So fearing God means to worship him, exalt him, praise and thank him for all things. The fear of the Lord is clean, touching on his exalted holiness and worthiness to be served.

Then this reverence and worship is one full of faith, full of the truth believed, full of trust in him, that he will never change his character, his word, his covenant. To fear God is to trust him so that you tremble at his Word, believing his Bible!

And love goes hand in hand with this. There is a fear which love casts out; but this godly fear brings love in. If I believe God and his Son Jesus, and trust in him, I believe his love for me, even though I am perfectly unworthy of that love. We love him because he first loved us.

And that love translates into obedience. A God-fearing man or woman or young person, is one who prays, ‘Your will be done!’ God is first in the most practical of ways.

This is what is absent in the hearts of unbelievers, all who stand here in the courts of Romans 3, convicted, condemned, cast off as corrupt, and as next time, hopeless in their silence – we have nothing to say to God for ourselves. There will be no “But...” at the last judgment.

How do we go from here to what Paul says in Romans 8.1 – there is therefore now NO condemnation? Or at the end of Romans 8 – there is to be NO separation as beloved children of God!?

Well, the first part of the gospel is about to step forward; the first notes of the gospel trumpet is about to sound.

How we need it! Are you hearing it today? Do you know how we are made right with God? Well, it begins by know that you are wrong with God, and turning to his rescue, his help, what the Bible calls his salvation!