

“GOD GAVE THEM UP”: A STUDY IN DIVINE RETRIBUTION

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*Isaiah speaks of the judgment inflicted by God’s wrath as His strange act and His strange work. The Pauline picture of human history in Rom 1:18–3:20 tells more about God’s judgment and why it is “strange.” His threefold use of *paredōken* tells of God’s giving mankind over to deserved punishment, which is more than a permissive divine action and more than a privative action—a withholding of common grace. It must be a judicial act of God in imposing His wrath on mankind. The devolution in human history is reflected in the more recent tendency of society to accept the sin of homosexuality and other sexual deviations as a mere sickness and not as sin. Civilizations throughout the world, particularly in the United States, are hurrying to their destruction by neglecting the righteousness of God in Christ, thus bringing on themselves the judgment of God as described in Rom 1:18–3:20. This is God’s temporal judgment which is preliminary to His eternal judgment on a rebellious human race. Retributive justice is an attribute of God and a necessary feature of His actions toward unbelieving humanity.*

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Preaching to his Sunday congregation on Rom 1:18-32 in Bern, Switzerland, at the Münster, Walter Lüthi said, “In the words that we have just read we are told the whole truth about our condition. There may well be people among us who cannot bear to hear the truth, and would like to creep quietly away out of this church. Let them do so if they wish.”¹ There is much justification for Lüthi’s words, for Paul’s canvas upon which he has painted his picture—dark, foreboding, threatening, flashing with

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¹Walter Lüthi, *The Letter to the Romans: An Exposition*, trans. Kurt Schoenenberger (Richmond, Va.: 1961)19.

lightning and crashing with thunder—is crammed with forms and figures, fights and shadows, of sin, wrath, and judgment. And the revelation of wrath is total and complete, encompassing all and rendering all without excuse and under condemnation, both individually and collectively.

Isaiah has spoken of judgment as God's "strange work" and His "strange act"² (cf. Isa 28:21, AV), and the idea that it is strange because contrary to His goodness and grace, while a popular contemporary misunderstanding of his words, is not only out of harmony with the context of Isa 28:21, but it also does not agree with the total picture of the being and attributes of God in Scripture. His retributive justice is one of His essential properties, and in this passage in Romans it comes to the center of the stage. In the threefold *paredōken* (AV, "gave up"; vv. 24, 26, 28) the problem is plainly before the reader. It is the purpose of this article to analyze and, if possible, clarify the meaning of the term, setting it within the context of the theology of the being and attributes of God. But first, a word regarding the flow of the Pauline thought in this section of the letter.

After having introduced this message to the Romans (cf. 1:1-7) and stated his theme, the gospel (1:16-17), the apostle skillfully and in detail develops the case-history of human sin and condemnation (1:18-3:20). The section moves from the declaration of Gentile sin³ (1:18-32) through Jewish sin (2:1—3:8) to the climax of the apostolic diagnosis that "all the world" is guilty, with every mouth stopped, speechless in the terror of condemnation before a holy and righteous God (3:9-20).

In the immediate context Paul, in his endeavor to prove that the only righteousness available to man is that obtained by faith, declared that God's displeasure toward sin has been revealed from heaven (1:18). It follows, of course, that all who are charged with ungodliness or unrighteousness stand under His wrath and cannot obtain acceptance before God by their character or conduct. That the Gentiles are guilty and, therefore, inexcusable is evident, because they have enjoyed a revelation of God's eternal power and deity and yet have rejected it (1:19-20).⁴ And

²There is nothing unusual about the Hebrew adjectives זר and נכריה, translated "strange" in the AV, except perhaps their emphatic position. That is their meaning. The NASB has "unusual" and "extraordinary."

³Martin prefers to define the subjects as "the Greek religious type, man without special revelation," but the sense is the same. Cf. James P. Martin, "The Kerygma of Romans," *Interpretation* xxv (July, 1971):311

⁴In an earlier article it was pointed out that natural revelation exists, but its light is not fully appropriated because of human sin. *Notitia* and *assensus*, two of the basic elements of faith, may be present as a result of God's revelation of Himself in nature, but the vital element of faith, *fiducia*, is never given through natural revelation. In its place is the rebellion of suppression. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill and trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. xx (2 vols.; Philadelphia, 1960); T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids, 1959); Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York and London, 1965). A recent article of some worth by Gerald J. Postema is

not only have they rejected the light of this truth, they have given themselves up to idolatry (1:21-23). 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).

There remains, therefore, only one alternative for God and man, divine retribution, and it is this that the apostle so solemnly, and yet vigorously,⁵ proclaims in the final section of chapter one (1:24-32). The *dio* (AV, “wherefore”) makes the connection. In the light of the rebellion just described, the inference of vindictory justice is drawn. Sin justly brings judgment,⁶ a judgment expressed most clearly in the following three verses of this final section of chapter one.

The Biblical Revelation

24 Wherefore God *gave them over* (Gr., *paredōken*) in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.

26 For this reason God *gave them over* (Gr., *paredōken*) to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for the unnatural.

28 And just as they did not see fit to retain the full knowledge of God, God *gave them over* (Gr., *paredōken*) to a depraved mind, to do the things which are not proper (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

The Interpretation of the Revelation

The essence, the heart, the *Leit Motif* of the passage and the divine judgment is expressed in the threefold *paredōken* (AV, “gave up,” vv. 24, 26 ; “gave over,” v. 28), repeated as a terrifying refrain.⁷ It is a term over which there has raged considerable debate, and it is to the elucidation of it that this article is addressed.

“Calvin’s Alleged Rejection of Natural Revelation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* xxiv (November 1971):423-34.

⁵ Godet thinks there is more than vigor here; there is a feeling of indignation. He writes, “The verses have something of that *παροξυσμός*, that *exasperation of heart*, of which the author of the Acts speaks (xvii.16) when describing Paul’s impressions during his stay at Athens” (F. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by A. Cusin [2 vols.; Edinburgh, 1881] 1:177).

⁶ The Byzantine text and some of the leading representatives of the Western text have a *καί* (AV, “also”) following *διό*. If this were genuine, it would suggest the harmony of the nature of the punishment and the offence. Godet has put it well, “They sinned, *wherefore* God punished them; they sinned by degrading God, *wherefore also* God degraded them” (1:177). Zahn appears to incline towards its genuineness, too. Cf. Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Leipzig, 1910) 96.

⁷ Cf. M.-J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul Épître aux Romains* (4th ed.; Paris, 1930), p. 28. He remarks that the term’s threefold occurrence is not climactic, but is a kind of refrain.

Generally speaking, there are three contending viewpoints.

First, perhaps the favorite interpretation of the term is that which has prevailed since the time of Origen and Chrysostom, in which the *paredōken* is taken in the permissive sense. According to this view God passively permitted men to fall into the retributive consequences of their infidelity and apostasy. The active force of *paredōken* is surely contrary to this view. It is not that God permitted rebellious men to fall into uncleanness and bodily dishonor; 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.⁸

Second, another popular view, which became current after the time of Augustine, takes the *paredōken* in the privative sense. According to this interpretation God deprived man of an aspect of His work of common grace. He withdrew His hand that had restrained men from evil. Godet has expressed and illustrated this interpretation about as well as it can be set forth. "Wherein did His action consist?" he asks. And the answer follows, "He positively withdrew His hand; He ceased to hold the boat as it was dragged by the current of the river. This is the meaning of the term used by the apostle, Acts xiv.16 : 'He *suffered* the Gentiles to walk in their own ways,' by not doing for them what He never ceased to do for His own people. It is not a case of simple abstention, it is the positive withdrawal of a force."⁹

At bottom this view is the practical equivalent of the permissive view. This is evident from the fact that Godet uses Acts 14:16 as illustrative of the sense. However, in that passage the verb used is *eiasen* (AV, "suffered"), which normally means simply to permit. As Meyer pointed out a long time ago, "Therefore Chrysostom not only explains it by *eiasen*, but illustrates the matter by the instance of a general who leaves his soldiers in the battle, and thus deprives them of his aid, and abandons them to the enemy. Theodoret explains it: τῆς οἰκειίας προμηδείασε γύμνωσε,¹⁰ and employs the comparison of an abandoned vessel. Theophylact illustrates the *παρέδωκεν* by the example of a physician who gives up a refractory patient (*παραδίδωσιν αὐτὸν τῷ ἐπὶ πλέον νοσεῖν*¹¹)."¹² These illustrations express quite well the privative view, but the Pauline language is stronger than this. The

⁸Cf. Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. John C. Moore from 5th German ed. (2 vols.; Edinburgh, 1881) 1:86.

⁹Godet, *Epistle to the Romans* 1:177-78.

¹⁰The clause may be translated, *he stripped (them) of his own foresight*.

¹¹The words may be rendered, *he delivers him over for further suffering*.

¹²Meyer, *Epistle to the Romans* 1:86.

expression, “God gave them up to uncleanness,” describes a judicial act,¹³ a “judicial abandonment.”¹⁴ The active force of *paredōken* must not be glossed over.¹⁵

Therefore, finally, it becomes clear that the term must be given a judicial sense.¹⁶ The meaning is not simply that God withdrew from the wicked the restraining force of His providence and common grace, although that privative sense is included in the judicial sense, but that He positively gave men over to the judgment of “more intensified and aggravated cultivation of the lusts of their own hearts with the result that they reap for themselves a correspondingly greater toll of retributive vengeance.”¹⁷ The usage of the word in both this epistle (4:25 ; 6:17 ; 8:32) and other Pauline Epistles (cf. 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20) supports this force.¹⁸ The interpretation is also in harmony with the occurrence of the precisely identical form in Acts 7:42, where, in speaking of Israel’s apostasy in the days of Moses, Stephen says, “Then God turned, and *gave them up* (Gr., *paredōken*) to worship the host of heaven.” Both the Romans and the Acts passages describe the act of God as a penal infliction of retribution, the expression of an essential attribute of God’s nature and being, and it is thoroughly consistent with His holiness.

There is another striking occurrence of the identical form of the verb in Eph 4:19, and that passage serves to remind the interpreter that the infliction of punitive justice does not compromise the free agency and responsibility of man. In that passage Paul, speaking of the sin of the Gentiles, writes, “Who being past feeling have given themselves over (Gr., *paredōken*) unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.” In the midst of the retributive action of God there is no coercion of man. God does not entice or compel to evil.¹⁹ Man remains responsible and can even be said to be giving himself over to uncleanness while God gives him up to the judgment of his sin.

¹³John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 1:44.

¹⁴Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1909) 58; Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* 96-97.

¹⁵Cf. Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (11th ed.; Göttingen, 1957) 58; Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* 96-97. Both point out that Paul’s expression must not be weakened, but neither develops the question theologically.

¹⁶Schlatter points out that *παρέδωκεν* is the usual word for the sentence of a judge. Cf. A. Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit* (Stuttgart, 1959) 66.

¹⁷Murray, *Epistle to the Romans* 1:44-45.

¹⁸See Friedrich Büchsel, “*δίδωμι et al.*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2:170.

¹⁹Hodge, *Epistle to the Romans* 45.

Concluding Questions

There is hardly any passage in the Bible that says plainer than this one that moral depravity is the result of the judgment of God. And this raises an interesting question that concerns the present moral condition of the nations of the world, and particularly of the United States of America. The question is this: What is the real significance of the spread of immorality, crime, and violence in western civilization? To compound the problem, the newspapers are filled with stories of clergymen encouraging sexual license. Many Christian ministers, contrary to the Apostle Paul's teaching, no longer regard homosexuality and other sexual aberrations as a sin. It is rather a sickness, or a weakness. In an article in one of the national news magazines a few years ago homosexuality was referred to by the author as "an undesirable handicap."²⁰ To many today it is nothing more than a deviation from the customary sexual patterns, a third sex. Occasionally, in what must seem to the Christian the ultimate evil, homosexuality is traced to God Himself, for, it is said, He made men and women what they are!²¹

Some thirty years ago the famous Harvard sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, in his book *The Crisis of Our Age*, warned that increases in crime, suicides, mental breakdowns, revolutions, and war have been symptoms of civilizations in the midst of death pangs. In another article on homosexuals in *Time* magazine the author wrote, "At their fullest flowering, the Persian, Greek, Roman and Moslem civilizations permitted a measure of homosexuality; as they decayed, it became more prevalent."²² Later Sorokin in his *The American Sex Revolution* pointed out that sex anarchy leads to mental breakdowns, rather than the other way around, as the Freudian psychologists have taught.²³ Further, he pointed out that increasing sexual license leads to decreasing creativity and productivity in the intellectual, artistic, and economic spheres of life.

What, then, are the sources of the problems of the present age? As Howard indicates, "Spengler had a biological answer: civilizations grow old and die like any other living thing. Toynbee has a religious answer: civilizations fail to respond to the higher challenges of the Spirit and therefore fossilize. In his *Civilization and Ethics*, Albert Schweitzer tried to find an ethical answer. St. Paul had still a different

²⁰"Homosexuality," *Time* (October 24, 1969):82.

²¹Of course, the truth of the matter is that homosexuality is a perversion of the created order. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 39.

²²"The Homosexual: Newly Visible, Newly Understood," *Time* (October 31, 1969):65.

²³Cf. I. E. Howard, "The Fever Chart of a Sick Society," *Christian Economics* (April 6, 1965):4. Howard's brief article is very suggestive, and the writer is deeply indebted to it.

answer.”²⁴

The Pauline answer is plain, and Romans 1:24 expresses it most impressively and succinctly. When man rebelled and sinned, God “gave them up” to uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts that by their own activities their bodies might be dishonored. In other words, sexual rebellion, license, and anarchy is the retributive judgment of God. The civilization of the western world, including the particular civilization of the United States of America, is not a civilization in danger of contracting a fatal disease. That civilization has already contracted a malignant and fatal cancer through its unbelief of the message of God in Christ. It is now hurrying on with increasing speed to final climactic destruction. Civilizations do not die because of violence, crime, immorality, and anarchy. These things are the evidences that death is already at work, a death brought on by disobedience to the revelation of God. Charles Hodge was referring to these principles when he said, almost one hundred years ago in reference to the Christian body of truth, “Religion is the only true foundation, and the only effectual safeguard for morality. Those who abandon God, He abandons. Irreligion and immorality, therefore, have ever been found inseparably connected.”²⁵

It should be carefully noted that the apostle is not speaking of eternal punishment in these three verses. What he has specifically in mind is a judgment that pertains to this life, not to the life to come. But, on the other hand, it is also plain that Paul’s words lead on to the doctrine of everlasting torment (cf. v. 32).²⁶ The vindictory judgment inflicted by God is continued in the life to come in a more terrible and permanent form if the escape through the gospel of the cross is neglected. The doctrine of eternal punishment has never been popular, and it is less so now. Even evangelical seminaries seem embarrassed by it.²⁷ There is an old story about Boswell and Dr. Samuel Johnson that contains solemn truth. When the latter once appeared overfearful as to his future, Boswell said, “Think of the mercy of your Savior.” “Sir,” replied Johnson, “my Savior has said that He will place some on his right hand, and some on his left.”

It is doubtful that there is a doctrine in the Bible easier to prove than that of eternal punishment (cf. Matt 25:46²⁸), a fact that reminds one of an incident involving Henry Ward Beecher and William G. T. Shedd, both eminent leaders of their day.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Hodge, *Epistle to the Romans* 45.

²⁶Cf. Barrett, *Epistle to the Romans* 38. He writes, “God’s judgment has already broken forth; only he has consigned sinners not to hell but to sin—if indeed these be alternatives.”

²⁷Cf. “Doctrinal Changes at Fuller,” *Christianity Today* (May 7, 1971):39-40 (767-68).

²⁸The twofold use of the adjective *aīōnion* (AV, “everlasting” and “eternal”) with *kolasin* (AV, “punishment”) and *zōēn* (AV, “life”) indicates that the punishment for sin is just as long as the life that God gives the faithful. Both are eternal. Many other passages express the same truth.

The *North American Review* engaged the two men for articles on the subject of eternal punishment, knowing the views of the two men. Beecher had once commented, "I believe that punishment exists, both here and hereafter; but it will not continue after it ceases to do good. With a God who could give pain for pain's sake, this world would go out like a candle." Shedd was asked to write an article supporting the doctrine, and Beecher was asked to answer it. When the proof sheets of Shedd's article were sent to Beecher he telegraphed from Denver to the magazine's editors, "Cancel engagement. Shedd is too much for me. I half believe in eternal punishment now myself. Get somebody else." The reply was never written by anyone. Shedd remained unanswered.²⁹ There is no answer, biblically, logically, or philosophically to the doctrine of eternal punishment.

There is a final question that one might ask regarding Rom 1:24 and its declaration of divine retribution. When did the retribution occur? When did God "give up" the nations? Is the apostle referring to a specific event or time in the past, or is he simply interpreting broadly man's history? In the collective sense the rebellion of men against God had its inception at Babylon, and it has been surmised that Paul may have had in mind the construction of the tower of Babylon and its destruction, with man's scattering, by God (cf. Gen 11:1-9). It is doubtful that Paul had this in mind. On the other hand, there are two things that point to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden as the event the apostle was thinking about. In the first place, the fact that Paul traces the entrance of sin into the human race specifically to Eden in Romans 5:12 suggests that 1:24 is to be understood in the light of that important event. It was there that man rebelled against light, the light of both natural and special revelation, and turned to darkness. And it was there that judgment was inflicted on account of his sin, a judgment that consisted of wrath and death, accompanied by consequent immorality and wickedness, as history indicates.

In the second place, the terminology of verses 22-23 points fairly clearly to the Genesis account. For example, the phrases "to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things" (v. 23) is surely reminiscent of "the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Gen 1:26; cf. vv. 20-25). And, further, the phrases "the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image (lit., *the likeness of an image*) made like to corruptible man" appear to come from the Genesis account's "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (1:26). It thus seems that Paul was thinking of the Genesis record in the Romans passage, and this would support the view that he regarded God's giving up of man to uncleanness as occurring at the time of the fall, recorded in the early part of that same Genesis record.³⁰ There, then, man fell into sin,

²⁹Cf. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (rev. ed.; 3 vols.; Philadelphia: Judson, 1907) 3:1052-53.

³⁰Cf. M. D. Hooker, "Adam in Romans i," *New Testament Studies* 6 (July 1960):301.

judgment, and condemnation, with their inevitable companion, the retributive justice of immorality, crime, and all manner of evil.

In conclusion, one must conclude from Romans 1:24, 26 and 28 that retributive justice is an attribute of the living God and a necessary feature of His actions toward unbelieving man. To the question, “Can God really give man up to judgment?,” this passage provides a resounding “yes” answer. But, in fact, it is not the final and convincing answer to the question. That comes from the cross of Jesus Christ, which in the cry it elicits from our Lord, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” unmistakably affirms the fact that God can give man up to judgment. It was there that the sinless Man bore the judgment of God upon sin, and it forever proclaims the true nature of sin—it is worthy of the penalty of spiritual and physical death—and God’s hatred of it with His necessary condemnation of it.

One might say, “Does God, then, really care?” The answer to this question also is obvious, and it, too, comes from the cross. It was God who gave the Son as the vicarious sacrifice; it was He who initiated the work that produced the remedy for sin and condemnation. And it was the Son who voluntarily bore in agony the depths of the vindicatory judgment for sinners. And if that is not sufficient evidence of God’s love and concern, reflect further upon the fact that it is also He who has revealed to men their lost condition and the significance of the atoning death, inscribed its interpretation in the written Word of God and preserved that Word for countless millions to read and ponder. Isaiah was right. Although righteous and necessary, judgment is His “strange work” and His “strange act.”