

# THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

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Unknown, what has become of the **glory** we owe Him? If God is to us no longer what we are not, what has become of the **thanks** which are due to Him? The revolt of Prometheus is wholly justified when once Zeus—the 'No-God'—has been exalted to the throne of God.

And so the light has become in us darkness, and the wrath of God is inevitable—**They became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened.** The barrier is now indeed a barrier, and the 'No' of God is now indeed negation. Bereft of understanding and left to themselves, men are at the mercy of the dominion of the meaningless powers of the world; for our life in this world has meaning only in its relation to the true God. But this relation can be re-established only through the—*clearly seen*—memory of eternity breaking in upon our minds and hearts. There is no other relation to God save that which appears upon the road along which Job travelled. If this 'breaking in' does not occur, our thought remains merely empty, formal, critical and unproductive, incapable of mastering the rich world of appearance and of apprehending each particular thing in the context of the whole. Unbroken thought thereby divests itself of any true relation to the concrete world, and, contrariwise, the unbroken heart, that is to say, that sensitivity to things which is guarded by no final insight, divests itself of the control of thought. Dark, blind, uncritical, capricious, mankind becomes a thing in itself. Heartless, perceiving without observing and therefore empty, is our thought: thoughtless, observing without perceiving and therefore blind, is our heart. Fugitive is the soul in this world and soulless is the world, when men do not find themselves within the sphere of the knowledge of the unknown God, when they avoid the true God in whom they and the world must lose themselves in order that both may find themselves again.

This is the Cause of the Night in which we are wandering; this also is the Cause of the Wrath of God which has been manifested over our heads.

#### ITS OPERATION

i. 22-32

**v. 22. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.**

The picture of a world without paradox and without eternity, of knowing without the background of not-knowing, of a religion without the unknown God, of a view of life without the memory

of the 'No' by which we are encountered, has much to be said in its favour. It evokes confidence, for it is simple and straightforward and uncramped; it provides considerable security and has few ragged edges; it corresponds, generally speaking, with what is required by the practical experiences of life; its standards and general principles are conveniently vague and flexible; and it possesses, moreover, a liberal prospect of vast future possibilities. Once the possibility that things can be *clearly seen* (i. 20) is abandoned, men are able against this background to profess that they are wise. The Night, too, has its wisdom. But, nevertheless, the vanity of the mind and the darkness of the heart still remain facts to be reckoned with. The brilliance of this unbroken wisdom cannot be maintained in the actual course of events, for they have passed inevitably under the wrath of God. That God is not known as God is due, not merely to some error of thought or to some gap in experience, but to a fundamentally wrong attitude to life. Vanity of mind and blindness of heart inevitably bring into being corrupt conduct. The more the unbroken man marches along his road secure of himself, the more surely does he make a fool of himself, the more certainly do that morality and that manner of life which are built up upon a forgetting of the abyss, upon a forgetting of men's true home, turn out to be a lie. It is indeed not difficult to show that this is so.

**vv. 23, 24. And changed the glory of the incorruptible God for an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts unto uncleanness, that their bodies should be dishonoured among themselves.**

They changed the glory of the incorruptible—for an image of the corruptible. That is to say, the understanding of what is characteristic of God was lost. They had lost their knowledge of the crevasse, the polar zone, the desert barrier, which must be crossed if men are really to advance from corruption to incorruption. The distance between God and man had no longer its essential, sharp, acid, and disintegrating ultimate significance. The difference between the incorruption, the pre-eminence and originality of God, and the corruption, the boundedness and relativity of men had been confused. Once the eye, which can perceive this distinction, has been blinded, there arises in the midst, between here and there, between us and the 'Wholly Other', a mist or concoction of religion in which, by a whole

series of skilful assimilations and mixings more or less strongly flavoured with sexuality, sometimes the behaviour of men or of animals is exalted to be an experience of God, sometimes the Being and Existence of God is 'enjoyed' as a human or animal experience. In all this mist the prime factor is provided by the illusion that it is possible for men to hold communication with God or, at least, to enter into a covenant relationship with Him without miracle—vertical from above, without the dissolution of all concrete things, and apart from THE truth which lies beyond birth and death. But, on whatever level it occurs, if the experience of religion is more than a void, or claims to contain or to possess or to 'enjoy' God, it is a shameless and abortive anticipation of that which can proceed from the unknown God alone. In all this busy concern with concrete things there is always a revolt against God. For in it we assist at the birth of the 'No-God', at the making of idols. Enveloped in mist, we forget not merely that all that passes to corruption is a parable, but also that it is ONLY a parable. The glory of the incorruptible God has been confused with the image (Ps. cvi. 20) of corruptible things. Some one of the relationships of men to the objects of their fear or of their desire, to some means of their subsistence, to some product of their own thought or action, to some impressive occurrence in nature or in history, is taken to be in itself significant and of supreme importance, as though even this selected relationship were not broken by the witness it bears to the unknown Creator whose glory cannot be confused with the known glory of an image, however pure and delicate. From such supposed direct communion with God—genuine only when it is not genuine, when it is not romanticized into an 'experience', when it is at once dissolved and claims to be merely an open space, a sign-post, an occasion, and an opportunity—there emerge precisely all those intermediary, collateral, lawless divinities and powers and authorities and principalities (viii. 38) that obscure and discolour the light of the true God. In the realm of romantic direct communion—in India, for example—these divinities are thrown up in the most extravagant numbers. Wherever the qualitative distinction between men and the final Omega is overlooked or misunderstood, that fetishism is bound to appear in which God is experienced in birds and fourfooted things, and finally, or rather primarily, in the likeness of corruptible man—Personality, the Child, the Woman—and in the half-spiritual, half-material creations, exhibitions, and representations of His creative ability—Family, Nation, State, Church, Fatherland. And so the 'No-God' is

set up, idols are erected, and God, who dwells beyond all this and that, is 'given up'.

**Wherefore God gave them up.** The confusion avenges itself and becomes its own punishment. The forgetting of the true God is already itself the breaking loose of His wrath against those who forget Him (i. 18). The enterprise of setting up the 'No-God' is avenged by its success. Deified nature and deified spirits of men are, in truth, very gods; like Jupiter and Mars, Isis and Osiris, Cybele and Attis, they come to be the very breath of our life. Our conduct becomes governed precisely by what we desire. By a strict inevitability we reach the goal we have set before us. The images and likenesses, whose meaning we have failed to perceive, become themselves purpose and content and end. And now men have really become slaves and puppets of things, of 'Nature' and of 'Civilization', whose dissolution and establishing by God they have overlooked. And now there is no higher power to protect them from what they have set on high. And, moreover, the uncleanness of their relation to God submerges their lives also in uncleanness. When God has been deprived of His glory, men are also deprived of theirs. Desecrated within in their souls, they are desecrated also without in their bodies, for men are one. The concreteness of the creatureliness of their lives becomes now dishonour; and lust—sexuality both in the narrower and in the wider sense of the word—becomes, as the primary motive-power of their whole desire and striving, altogether questionable and open to suspicion. The whole ignominy of the course of the world they must now bear and bemoan and curse as ignominy; and further, in their separation from God they must continue to give it ever new birth. They have wished to experience the known god of this world: well! they have experienced him.

**vv. 25-7. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile passions: for their women changed the natural relation of the sexes into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another, men with men working unseemliness, and receiving in their own body that recompense of their error which was due.**

They exchanged the truth for a lie. Complete rebellion from God soon takes to itself more pronounced forms. It would not

be unexpected were direct experience of God to have occasioned some occasional and rather humorous changes, some superficial errors, some dissolution of the Truth of God into a number of worldly-wise maxims. But though this is, no doubt, possible, it is not long before the Truth is quite seriously exchanged for a lie. The tiny mist between God and man, by which the far distance is obscured, soon becomes a veritable sea of clouds. Some half-conscious resentment at the unknown God very soon becomes fully conscious. The dazzled eye is soon damaged. Principalities and powers, formerly but seldom exalted to the throne, are soon established there, encircled with a halo of *everlasting power and divinity* (i. 20). The Creator, the eternal Archetype, meanwhile grows ever more and more 'abstract', 'theoretical', insignificant, and unloved. The completely concrete 'No-God' has won his victory, even though there may, perhaps, remain some bleak survival of the Unknown behind what is thought to be genuinely significant and magnificent, some occasional reference to a final secret in the midst of so much busy service of him whom we name 'God'. The only reality, the unknown, living God, appears nebulous, problematical, and unreal, whereas the world, separated from Him, and men, unbroken by any memory of Him, appear in a nimbus of security, necessity, and reality. The world is **worshipped and served**—if it be necessary, quite apart from its Creator. In their general view of the world scientists and historians are in far closer agreement with philosophers and theologians than is normally recognized. It is not merely that the world exists side by side with God: it has taken His place, and has itself become God, and demands 'the same devotion which the old-fashioned believer offered to His God' (Dr. F. Strauss). Contradictions within the deified world—Nature and Civilization, Materialism and Idealism, Capitalism and Socialism, Secularism and Ecclesiasticism, Imperialism and Democracy—are not so serious as they give themselves out to be. Such contradictions are contradictions within the world, and there is for them no paradox, no negation, no eternity.

**For this cause God gave them up.** Unbroken naturalness is not pure. Nor are matters improved when 'naturalness' is penetrated by piety. In 'naturalness' there is always secreted that which is non-natural, and, indeed, that which actually contradicts nature. This contradictory factor awaits the hour when it will break forth. When, by allowing nature to run its course freely and uncontradicted, God and the world have become confused with one another, there comes into

prominence a further confusion: what cannot be avoided or escaped from becomes confused with some necessity of nature, and this is in very truth a demonic caricature of the necessity of God. These two confusions stand altogether on one line, they belong together and cohere together. What is at first merely open to suspicion moves inexorably on to what is positively absurd. Everything then becomes Libido: life becomes totally erotic. When the frontier between God and man, the last inexorable barrier and obstacle, is not closed, the barrier between what is normal and what is perverse is opened.

**vv. 28-31.** A final and even sharper pointing of the whole situation is not only conceivable but actually takes place. In the perversity of this relation to God there still, however, remains a relic of clarity of sight, a last, warning recollection of the secret of God that withstands the arrogance of religion. A reflection of this secret lies even in the deified forces of the world, even in the deified universe itself. From time to time this bare relic of the Unknown reasserts itself in the presentiment of awe. But even this can cease. The damaged eye may become blind. Defective knowledge can become ignorance of God; it may become AGNOSIA (1 Cor. xv. 34). **Even as they refused to have God in their knowledge.**—That is to say, they became no longer capable of serious awe and amazement. They become unable to reckon with anything except feelings and experiences and events. They think only in terms of more or less spiritual sophistry, without light from above or from behind.—**God gave them up to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, unmerciful.** Here is the final vacuity and disintegration. Chaos has found itself, and anything may happen. The atoms whirl, the struggle for existence rages. Even reason itself becomes irrational. Ideas of duty and of fellowship become wholly unstable. The world is full of personal caprice and social unrighteousness—this is not a picture merely of Rome under the Caesars! The true nature of our unbroken existence is here unrolled before us. Our ungodliness and unrighteousness stand under the wrath of God. His judgement now becomes judgement and nothing more;

and we experience the impossibility of men as the real and final impossibility of God.

v. 32. It ought not to be difficult for us to perceive this sequence, but—**Knowing the ordinance of God, that they which practise such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but also consent with them that practise them.** This is the wisdom of the Night issuing in folly (i. 22): folly, because it holds firmly to a two-dimensional plane, a plane persistently contradicted by actual occurrence. The wisdom of the Night knows whither the unbroken road is leading. It understands quite clearly the meaning of its direction and of its goal. It knows the Cause; it sees the Operation; but it dare not give the command to halt. The road of those who forget their Creator is accompanied always by a strange complaint against the frailty of human existence, and by indictments against human sinfulness. But in spite of all this, with their eyes fixed upon the earth, they affirm the edifice which is erected on it, concentrate their desire upon it, approve it, hope for its continued existence, and, regardless of every protest, constitute themselves its guardians. But why is it so difficult to remember what has been forgotten, though it is quite clear that the operation of this forgetfulness and the end of our wandering in the Night is—Death?

## *The Second Chapter*

### THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF MEN

#### THE JUDGE

##### II. I-13

To whom, then, *is the wrath of God revealed* (i. 18)? And what is the situation which can be seen only in the light of His wrath? Who are these men who have adopted the known God of this world, the No-God, as their God? Who are the ungodly and the unrighteous whom God has given up? Can every single man, all humanity, be meant? Must it be assumed that we all stand before the barrier and that, unless we are aware of our position, we must remain barred up and our lives but vanity and darkness? Or may not some perhaps, even though they be few, be able to avoid this situation? May not the wrath of God be just one possibility, peculiar to a certain type of men and women and characteristic of certain periods of history? Are there in the army of light no heroes who have broken through and escaped from the darkness? Is there not marching side by side with ungodliness and unrighteousness a veritable righteousness of men? Can we not imagine, and does there not actually exist, a humble godliness by which men achieve a higher order of existence and become thereby no longer worthy of death (i. 32)? Is not their faith an obvious psychological and historical fact? Does not this very faith enable them to escape from the ungodliness of this world and free themselves from the bars behind which we all are confined? Have they—*But we*—not scaled a height that is inaccessible to the generality of men, whence, as men apart, they look virtuously down upon those beneath them, incapable, as yet, of the perception to which they have attained? Does not an island of the blest rise from the ocean of the unfortunate: an island of men able to hear the long-promised Gospel of God? If we are able to conceive the possibility of honouring the unknown God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, does not this carry with it the possibility of escape from the burden of His wrath? Has none held himself upright at the bar of the divine judgement of the world as it is, and, after his removal from the darkness, sat down by the side of God as His assessor in judgement? Or must we take it that the circle is closed and that no one has eluded the inevitability of cause and effect, of downfall and apostasy, which is the mark of men as men and of the world as the world?