

## **“The Flip Side: Restraining Grace” (Romans 1:18–32)(2.7.21)**

Romans 1:18–32 (NIV84)

<sup>18</sup>The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, <sup>19</sup>since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. <sup>20</sup>For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

<sup>21</sup>For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup>They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

<sup>26</sup>Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup>In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

<sup>28</sup>Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup>They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup>they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup>Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

### **The word of God for the people of God.**

LET US PRAY.

Title: **“The Flip Side: Restraining Grace”**

INTRODUCTION:

Most of us are old enough to remember small records called 45’s. On one side, the “A” side, was the hit side, the popular and most often played side of the record. The flip side, or “B” side of the record, was less well known and played little if at all.

What is most obvious about this scripture and what is most often preached, is what God is against. It tells us how bad people are; in what ways they embrace godlessness; and, why they deserve the wrath of God. These verses show that people chose and still choose to do evil in the sight of God. That is the “A” side.

The flipside is the restraining grace of God. What is being explained, but is rarely expounded upon, is that God actively uses His blessing, goodness, and grace in this world. When the LORD removes His protective, guiding and providential hand, humanity **devolves** to its baseness and depravity.

Notice in verse 24: God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts; in verse 26: God gave the over to shameful lusts: and, in verse 28: God gave them over to a depraved mind. In effect, the LORD is saying, “Go ahead. Have it your own way.” His goodness was no longer restraining them from their proclivities or appetites.

It appears to be clear that this “giving over” is in itself the wrath of God. The Preacher’s Commentary says: “The more free they felt, the more pleasure they desired, and as freedom and pleasure reigned hand in hand, ironically both freedom and pleasure were forging their own chains. They became slaves to freedom, in bondage to pleasure.”

Do you believe that we today in our culture are living in such a state of God's wrath? Has the Lord's restraining grace been withdrawn? The evidence would seem to indicate the answer is an unequivocal YES!

BODY:

Let me give you a very simplified illustration of God's restraining grace. Dennis Pollock wrote it for the website [spiritofgrace.org](http://spiritofgrace.org):

"This also explains how God could have hardened Pharaoh's heart. This was not the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no hardening anointing God gives men and women. Consider a loaf of bread. How can you turn the bread from soft and pliant into hardened and entirely inedible? You could use some form of liquid hardener. Inject the hardener all through the bread with a hypodermic needle and wait an hour. The job will be done.

But there is another, simpler way to harden bread. You can take it out of its wrapper and do... nothing! That's right, nothing. Once out of its protective plastic, the bread will harden of itself with no outside agent needed. There was no need for God to do anything special to Pharaoh to harden his heart, other than to simply cease to employ His natural protective, restraining grace that keeps all men from becoming spiritually hardened. When God's restraining hand lifted, when His heart-softening grace was withdrawn, Pharaoh's heart quickly hardened and all his natural stubbornness and arrogance did the rest."

This naturally brings to mind Exodus 14:5–31 (NIV84):

<sup>5</sup> When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" <sup>6</sup> So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. <sup>7</sup> He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. <sup>8</sup> The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. <sup>9</sup> The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

<sup>10</sup> As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup> Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

<sup>13</sup> Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. <sup>14</sup> The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

<sup>15</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. <sup>16</sup> Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. <sup>17</sup> I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. <sup>18</sup> The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

<sup>19</sup> Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, <sup>20</sup> coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

<sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, <sup>22</sup> and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

<sup>23</sup> The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. <sup>24</sup> During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. <sup>25</sup> He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

<sup>26</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." <sup>27</sup> Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. <sup>28</sup> The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

<sup>29</sup> But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. <sup>30</sup> That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. <sup>31</sup> And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

I cannot think of a more dramatic illustration of the "hand of God" holding back the forces of evil.

Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt had imprisoned the Israelites for 430 years. During that time, Almighty God grew them from 70 people to a few million. The circumstances were engineered to bring Pharaoh's army against The Chosen People, trapping them against the Red Sea.

Pharaoh intended to bring them back into bondage. The LORD's intention was to liberate them from that bondage. The winds of God separated the seas. The two walls of water were restrained and a path through them was created. The people walked through on dry land to be led by Moses and the Presence of God. The army of the Adversary was destroyed and God's people were set free. They were truly free because they were led by God.

One of the presents from you all to Carol and I was the book, *Broken to Rise* by Docyl C. Tully. It gives a modern example of the restraining grace of God. Tully and his wife were living the so-called high life. They were young, attractive, and getting rich. They became immersed in the partying, and drugs overtook their lives. When it was out of control, they were arrested.

Chapter 2 - DESPAIR TO HOPE:

"Over a period of six months, we lost everything. Our business failed, we could not pay our bank notes or creditors, and we were considering bankruptcy. Time would produce some seven judgments filed against us, totaling over fifty-thousand dollars. It seemed like everybody and their brother wanted something out of me. I could not find work anywhere in town and had no place to run. Eventually my father-in-law, who ran an upholstery shop, agreed to give me a job, I went from ten-thousand dollars a week to about one-hundred dollars a week.

I was severely depressed and did not know what to do. Vonette and I were merely trying to survive. Too distressed by our own fears and desperation to help each other, we just existed. Should we try to escape to another country, like to Canada? Should we leave everything and everyone we knew, just to be free? The thoughts she had voiced on the couch the night of our arrest, about God getting our attention, kept surfacing with the idea that we should attend church. "Not me!" I would spew out. "Look what He (God) has done to us now. I will not have anything to do with Him!" It is hard to imagine how deep my despair was. The only occasional bright spot was the support of our parents (Vonette's mom and dad, Jeanette and Vonnie, and my mother, Dorothy). Their love and support was invaluable and flowed like a river in spite of our failure.

After our arrest some four months later, Vonette's cousin came by to offer support. He shared that God was the answer to our problems, and if she ever needed a ride to church, to give him a call. He would be glad to pick her up. Well, this idea needed time to develop. It's not that it wasn't the right answer; it just needed to soak into a confused mind. On a Wednesday night in April of 1981 some six months after our arrest, Vonette told me she was going with her cousin to church – to a prayer meeting.

Of course, I did not need a prayer meeting. That night, I fixed my normal high-balls. First, second, but by the third high-ball, the typical numbing did not come. I was sitting in a rocking chair in my living room. The TV was on, but I could not really hear it. There was a heaviness in the room...a coldness sweeping across my body.... The wall seemed to applaud with my despair, like some huge stadium of fans cheering me on to the deepest despair. Thoughts came piercing into my being.

You are a loser! The first thought screamed. I found myself agreeing. I am a loser, I thought, Why not? Everything I had valued was now gone.

You are worthless, came the second, more destructive thought, pointing to the way I was already feeling about myself. I had not only ruined my life, but my dear wife Vonette's as well. I had led her down this path, destroying all hope of either of us being successful. Again, I found myself agreeing.

It is hopeless. The third thought added more support to my total failure. Who would want to hire someone like me? How would I find a career or make a quality livelihood? My life was hopeless, and there was no future for me.

Finally, the goal of all of these thoughts came together to lead to the final blow. The crowds in the stands seem to cheer even louder. The cult-like chant, Do it!...Do it!...Do it!...began to rise and swell. Satan then placed the final blow with, Life is not worth living!

At this moment, a cold chill raced across my body, and a sweat broke out at the same time. I was on the verge of rising from the chair, walking to my back bedroom where I kept my gun, putting it to my head, and ending my worthless life – I was ready to take my own life! I had reached the very bottom...broken. By now the chant, Do it!...Do it!...Do it!.... Their voices rang with confidence because they had done this successfully so many times before. They moved in on me like tigers for the kill.

In that moment, a very small part of me remembered my mother taking me to church, remembered there was a God, remembered a Jesus who had given His life for me – and I could turn to Him! IN this split second a shaft of light pierced the coldness and heaviness in my living room. It dispelled the chanting crowds, and applauding walls and the hopelessness in my heart. It brought warmth, life, acceptance, forgiveness.

I fell out of the rocking chair and onto my knees and face, and I cried out, "Oh God, I need You! I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to act. All I know is that I need you, and I need You now!" As I looked up, I saw Jesus! I wept because of my unworthiness in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He was standing there in a bright white robe with His arms extended out towards me as if to say, "Come unto Me, I love you." His presence radiated light, warmth, love, forgiveness, and acceptance. He had dispelled all hopelessness and despair and instead ushered in salvation, hope, and a future – a new beginning I could not even dream of! In April 1981, I became a new man in Christ! He threw me a lifeline and asked me to hold on tight. I had a long way to go...

My wife returned home to a new man – a man who had given his life to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I became a man with new vision, new dreams, and new hopes that night. God Almighty became real in a way I had never experienced before. What I must face with my arrest had not gone away, but the way I would handle it would be very different.

As amazing as this conversion was, I was just as surprised when I learned that at the very moment I was warring in the spiritual realm, believers at my wife's prayer meeting were calling out our names before the Lord! They were pleading with Him to work in our lives, praying for me to turn to Him. The concert of love our God orchestrates is a movement too wonderful for words."

#### CONCLUSION:

God's restraining grace can shield from the infection of wickedness. God's restraining grace can hold back oppression and the tyranny of bondage. God's restraining grace can speak into the most despairing heart, preventing the pulling of a trigger, and saving from the abyss of hell. I need the blessing of God's

restraining grace. You need the blessing of God's restraining grace. Our fallen broken world needs the blessing of God's restraining grace.

Last week, we learned from the Gospel of John that Jesus came in the fullness of grace and truth. My friends, God's restraining grace is one portion of that fullness for our heavenly Father does not desire anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. Here is the third verse from Charles Wesley's hymn, "From the Master:"

Merciful God, on me  
The resolute mind bestow,  
On all my favour'd family,  
In *David's* steps to go:  
Let each his sin eschew  
Through Thy restraining grace,  
Our father *Abraham's* steps pursue,  
And walk in all Thy ways.  
Amen and amen. Let us pray.