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Romans 1:21-32 “The Terrible Consequences of Rejecting God”

Intro. In this section of Romans Paul is setting out to prove to any reasonable person the guilt of mankind before God. In so doing he vindicates the righteous judgment of God. As R. A. Torrey once wrote, “Shallow views of sin and of God’s holiness, and of the glory of Jesus Christ... lie at the bottom of weak theories of the doom of the impenitent.”

But he also has a saving purpose behind what he is doing here. Before a person will seek salvation in Jesus Christ, he must first understand that he is guilty before a holy God, and liable for the judgment and wrath of God (v.18). We must realize that we have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23), that we lack peace with God and true satisfaction, and we are in danger of spending eternity separated from God. You see, before we will experience the grace of God, we must acknowledge our guilt before God.

Have you ever come to the place in *your* life that you knew you were guilty before God? Have you ever experienced the convicting influence of the Holy Spirit, where you felt a great need for a Savior? If not, this message is especially for you. This message also should equip the believer to present the true gospel. Any gospel presentation that omits the reality of sin, God’s judgment, and the need for repentance is not the kind of gospel that will truly save a soul (cf. Galatians 1:6-9).

In chapter 1 Paul is setting forth the obvious guilt of the non-Jewish, pagan world. Yet Paul did not just have in mind the idol worshiper in the jungle, or the barbarian hoards outside the empire, but also the cultured Greek and Romans as well. And you can be sure that most of the sinful behavior that we read here sounds very much like modern society here in America. America is no longer a Christian nation; it is increasingly becoming a nation similar to the debauchery of the ancient Roman Empire. So what Paul writes here is as up to date as today’s news, and especially today’s entertainment media!

As you can tell, the subject that I will deal with today is not pleasant. I would prefer not to preach about some of this content. Just bear with me. There are some important truths here. So let us begin this difficult, but important journey through the remaining verses of chapter one. Now the first truth that I want to point out is that God’s wrath is merited because:

I. MAN HAS REJECTED GOD

John 1:11 indicates that Jesus came into His own world, but His own people rejected Him. Mankind is guilty because mankind as a whole has deliberately rejected God. This rejection of God is often gradual and progressive. Often it gets worse from one generation to the next. Thus mankind is heading toward destruction and is in great need of a dramatic change in direction.

In v.21 Paul said, “For although they knew God, they did not honor [lit. glorify] him as God....” As we discussed in our last message, the creation clearly reveals that there is a God, and it reveals quite a bit about the attributes of God, such as His great power and intelligence. Yet by in large, man has rejected this clear revelation about God. Man has failed to give glory and praise to God for His wonderful attributes, even though giving glory to God is a primary purpose for our very existence. Man is far more interested in glorifying himself. Then Paul adds that they did not

“give thanks to him...,” even though He is the source of many created blessings and pleasures, including life and what sustains it.

Now notice what else they did as a result. In v.23 Paul said that as they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images...” Have you ever made a bad exchange? Would you trade a \$5 bill for a wooden nickel? Well I want to show you something worse than that. Three times it says that man “exchanged” something:

V.23, they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images”

V.25, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie”

V.26, they “exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature”

So with that in mind, Paul indicates several ways that man has rejected God in this context, and the terrible consequences of that rejection. First:

A. They Exchange the Truth of God for a Lie – That’s what Paul says in v.25. Actually, Paul uses the definite article before “lie,” so it is “the lie.” People often exchange the true God¹ for the devil’s lie of false religion. The particular lie that Paul had in mind is given in the last of v.25, they “worshiped and served the creature rather than² the Creator...” What a paradox! Man has an innate desire to worship. However, instead of worshipping and sacrificing [*latreuo*] to the Creator, they worship the creature! This is in many ways a restatement of what he has already said in v.23. There Paul says that they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” They did not acknowledge the true God but made gods in keeping with their baser natures. Notice also the downward slide of idolatry. First, they made gods in their own image, like the Greek and Roman gods. Then they worshiped gods in the likeness of birds that soar in the heavens, then degraded to gods likened unto the beast of the earth, like the bull, and finally they even worshiped gods that were represented by serpents and other animals that crawl upon the earth. So you can see that idolatry is the particular form of the lie that Paul is addressing.

There is a clear tendency in sinful man to exchange the truth about God for the lie of a false god, or even the lie that there is no God at all. Mankind to this day is guilty of rejecting the truth about God in favor of false religion. The worship of idols images is still practiced to this day. Hindus have some 330 million gods!³ Yet this is not just a problem for those who worship physical images representing various gods. If you are worshipping any other god than the One revealed in the Bible, you have “exchanged the truth of God for the lie.” That’s why false religious teachers are so popular.

Furthermore:

B. They Reject Thinking About God – Notice what Paul said in the first part of v.28, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God...” I don’t think that is a good translation. The original language is more picturesque. He describes one who examines or put something to the test (*dokimazo*) and rejects it as worthless, like fool’s gold. Thus, they examine the truth about God and reject that knowledge of God. Even right here in America the vast majority do not value attending a

¹ If the clause, “and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” is explanatory of this clause, then “the truth of God” corresponds to “the Creator” and the worship and service of the creature corresponds to “the lie.” In that event “the truth of God” would be equivalent to the true God. On the other hand, this could be an objective genitive, “the truth about God.” If it is a subjective genitive is the truth given from God.

² “Rather than” is from *para*, which denotes the other side. It carries the idea that they “passed up” the Creator, in order to worship and serve the creatures.

³ Yet the first two of the 10 Commandments strictly forbid such a practice (Exodus 20:1-5).

church where the Bible is preached and taught. They do not value reading God's Word each day, to contemplate the glory of God. Why is that? Men do not like to be pricked in their conscience, so they devise means by which they can banish God from their knowledge. John 3:20 says, "Everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." So they have built cities and governments so that people can get along without God. Such people have expelled the knowledge of God from our public schools. Very little is said about God in a positive way on TV or in most movies. God is no longer talked about in normal conversation, except to take His name in vain. "They did not think it worthwhile to have God in their knowledge..." (HCSB).

Do these verses describe you, or someone you know? Well people can reject the truth about God, avoid thinking about God, and worship falsehoods instead, but such actions are not without consequences. So notice with me next of all something very serious:

II. IF YOU REJECT GOD, YOU CAN FACE ABANDONMENT BY GOD

The true child of God will never be abandoned or forsaken by God, but Paul says there that those who reject God will be abandoned by God to suffer the consequences of their unbelief and sin. Three times Paul repeats the same phrase in vv.24, 26, and 28, "God gave them up" (*paradidomi*), or "God gave them over." God gave such people over to the errors and sins that would destroy them. It's a terrible thing to reach a point where God stops His divine restraint and turns you loose to be destroyed by your own unbridled sin! After rejecting God again and again you can reach a point that God says, "Enough! I will leave you alone." Do you think that is what you really want? In Gen. 6:3 God said, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." When God stops striving with man, he is turned over to an ever-increasing cycle of sin until he is destroyed. There is undoubtedly a natural law of consequence operative in sin; it intensifies and aggravates itself when there is no restraint placed upon it. Man left to himself without God becomes a prisoner of his own ungodliness. I do not believe that God takes this action quickly, but only after years, or even after generational rejection of God.

Many do not want to believe that God would hold people responsible for their sin in this way, but it is the truth of the Word of God. Don't create your own god that fits the kind of god you want. The fact is, if you reject God and pursue false religion and sin, God will let you go until you fall into the destruction of your own sin. Yet there is a redemptive purpose in this. Perhaps when you reach bottom you will turn back to God.

This reminds me of the classic story of the prodigal son. He forsook his father and family and pursued a life of sin. His father let him go his own way. It wasn't long before his self-centered life consumed all that he had. It was only when he was forsaken by all his so-called friends, destitute, and in the lowest of jobs, that he turned back to his father, and returned home. His father received him with open arms and forgave him.

So when a person rejects the true God, and makes his own gods, notice with me what such people are given over to:

A. To Their Sinful Desires and Passions – In v.24 Paul said, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." Then in v.26 he said, "God gave them up to dishonorable passions." And notice in v.27 that they "were consumed with passion for one another." The word translated "consumed" (*ekkaio*) is intensive. It was an all-out endeavor to satisfy their totally-depraved nature. Yet such people never find lasting satisfaction. Their lust drives them to go from bar to bar trying to satisfy their lust for alcohol. They

go to harder and harder drugs seeking satisfaction. They go from one immoral sexual experience to another trying to satisfy their lust for sex, even though it leads to shame, disease, and broken homes. God punished their sins by giving them over to the desire of their hearts. Listen, you will never have peace and satisfaction until you turn to Jesus.

The tragedy is that the Bible teaches us that the unsaved shall be dominated by the lusts of the heart even after death. Hell will be a place of endless frustration, desire without fulfillment, craving without satisfaction (Luke 16:24). This is the natural law of consequence.

Furthermore, if you reject God, you will be given over:

B. To a Depraved, Degenerate Mind – In v.28 Paul said, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”⁴ “Debased” (*adokimos*) refers to something that is rejected as worthless after being put to the test. There is a play on words here. The same people who examined the God of creation and rejected Him as worthless shall be turned over to a mind that is worthless, seriously flawed. Likewise, Paul says in v.21 that when people turned from God, they “became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” They developed a mind incapable of sound judgment and drawing proper conclusions, especially when it comes to moral wisdom and spiritual truth, and the distinctions between right and wrong. Their conscience no longer works properly but grows insensitive. The depraved mind is well described in Proverbs 14:12, which says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” If you follow your own way of thinking instead of the Word of God, you will end up doing some rather foolish things.⁵

I believe we see examples of depraved minds in many of the political policy makers of today. They see the problem of teen pregnancy and offer birth control and abortion as the solution. They see gun violence and blame it on the gun, not the heart, mind, and upbringing of the one who pulls the trigger. They see young people with low self-esteem, and try to solve it with self-esteem programs that make people more self-centered and narcissistic. God says children are best raised at home, but politicians with a depraved mind suggest that we need to take children out of the home and put them in government schools where God is not mentioned, even children as young as 3 years old! Yet Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge....”

So when you reject God, you will be given over to burning, unfulfilled desires. You will be given over to a depraved, foolish mind, incapable of making wise choices. Finally, if you reject God, you will be given over:

C. To Moral Depravity – In v.24 Paul says God gave them over to “impurity.” In vv.26-31 Paul gives a catalog of sins that were common in the pagan world of his day. Notice how these sins are becoming increasingly prevalent today. That ought to tell us something! Let’s start with the sin that Paul begins with:

1. Homosexuality – Paul says in vv.26-27, “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the

⁴ The word translated “ought not to be done” (*kathekon*) was a technical term of Stoic philosophy, denoting what constituted proper or fitting conduct.

⁵ 1 Cor. 2:14 says, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” See also Ephesians 4:17b-18.

due penalty for their error.”⁶ Modern American society has by and large rejected this biblical teaching but that very rejection supports the very point Paul is making here in this text of Scripture. Once you reject God and His absolute truth as revealed in both creation and Scripture you open yourself up to beliefs and practices that lead to the judgment of God. My job as a faithful preacher of the Word is not to change God’s Word or ignore it to accommodate culture but to proclaim its truth for our own good.

Now that word on the screen is the elephant in the room. No one is going to miss it. Those on the outside will attack me for sharing this Scripture, and perhaps some on the inside will become defensive. So before I deal with this further, I want to say up front that I do not condone an unloving attitude toward the homosexual person. We are to treat all people with kindness and respect. We should be like Jesus, who was known as a “friend of sinners.” I suppose that most who practice homosexuality have homosexual feelings and desires that they acquired while they were still young. Many did not seek or ask for such feelings. I believe it is just one more reality of the fallen, sin-cursed world that we live in. But there is forgiveness through Jesus Christ. He can set you free from sin. Also keep in mind that the focus here is upon homosexual *activity* and not the feelings one may have. Furthermore, this is just one of many sins listed in this text of Scripture, which I am about to share.

Yet why does Paul give more extensive attention to this particular sin compared to the ones listed in vv.29-31? First, contextually he is addressing the guilt of the Gentiles, and the practice of homosexuality was quite common in the Gentile world, in strong contrast to the Jews. Secondly, just as idolatry is contrary to the revelation of God in creation, even so homosexuality is contrary to the design of God as revealed in creation. God created male and female as stated twice in the creation account (Gen. 1:27; 5:2).⁷ Jesus, in a context regarding marriage, quoted that same Scripture regarding God’s creative design (Mt. 19:4). So from the beginning God created male and female, husband and wife, mother and father. Homosexuality is certainly contrary to God’s creative design and the conditions that give rise to it have resulted from man’s rejection of God. That why Paul points out in the last of v.26 and v.27 that it is unnatural, or contrary to nature.

Notice that Paul first deals with lesbianism in v.26. It may seem surprising that he mentions women first, but he does so because sexual modesty is supposed to be woman’s most beautiful adornment.⁸ Then he deals more extensively in v.27 with male homosexuality.

We should notice Paul’s evaluation of homosexuality. In v.26 he indicates that homosexual passion is dishonorable (*atimia*). Then in the last of v.27 he says that such acts are “shameless,” (*aschemosune*) indecent, unseemly, obscene. Yet they often feel no shame for what they are doing. They even put such behavior on display in parades and in the entertainment industry. By the way, I believe all *sexual* expression should be done in privacy, Amen? And then, he says that those who engage in such an abomination will receive “the due penalty for their error.” A 2007 report from Scandinavia indicated that the life expectancy of homosexuals is 20+ years shorter than that of heterosexuals [*Baptist Press*, Apr. 17, 2007]. Homosexual relationships are more prone to the transmission of disease, especially when multiple partners are involved.

When God gives people over to moral depravity, they become enslaved to:

⁶ See also Genesis 19:1-28; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:10.

⁷ Though translated “men” and “women” Paul deliberately uses the Greek terms for male (*arsen*) and female (*thelys*), probably thinking of those terms in the creation account.

⁸ 1 Tim. 2:9 says, “likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control....”

2. Many Other Sins – In fact, Paul goes on to mention at least 21 additional sins that prove the guilt and sinfulness of man, lest someone who was not guilty of idolatry or homosexuality would feel excused. [The KJV, based on later texts, has 23]. These are mostly sins of the spirit which are both anti-God and antisocial. They rend the fabric of society. He says in vv.29-31 that such people are “being filled with all manner of unrighteousness,⁹ evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”¹⁰ What is so bad is that God says that man is “full” of these sins. The Greek text indicates that these sins have become established in their character [perfect tense]. It starts with the fact that the seeds of all these things are an inherent part of the make-up of every one of us. Yet as a person forsakes God and He turns them over to a debased mind and the power of sin within, these sins take root and take over. Such passages as this teach the total depravity of man. We are sinful by nature, and we have the capacity for becoming overcome with evil. There was a time when the fear of God held such sinful activities in check, but increasingly in our society many do not fear God, so there is no self-restraint and increasingly our society is removing the restraints of disfavor and judicial consequence.

Are you guilty of any of the sins listed here? Is anyone covetousness (*pleonexia*), never satisfied with what you have, but always wanting more? Is anyone here malicious? You have ill will toward someone, even to the point of desiring to harm them? Are you full of envy toward someone? You’re unhappy about someone else’s success or possessions? Does anyone here tend to engage in strife, contention, and wrangling? That is so common today. Social media has become a platform for such sins! Are you guilty of deceit? Do you lie and deceive? The word translated “gossips” is literally “whisperers.” Do we have any whisperers here, those who quietly slander or gossip about others? Do we have any slanderers or backbiters (*katalalos*), who always tend to speak against others, even on social media? Do we have anyone among us who is violent or insolent? This refers to behaving with insulting and humiliating arrogance to those who are not powerful enough to retaliate. Is anyone guilty of pride and boasting? I’m sure we have quite a few who have been “disobedient to parents.” Many are untrustworthy. They don’t honor their word. Some are “heartless” or unloving, and our text is referring to the lack of natural affection even for their own children. They abort or abandon their own children. In the last 20 years we have seen vivid pictures of the way ungodly people can be so “ruthless” or unmerciful. Terrorists show no mercy upon their victims, which often include women and children. We have heard too many horrible stories of school shootings, where young men with guns have shown no mercy to their victims. Police officers have been gunned down with no mercy toward them or their families. And mark my words, as our society turns from God more and more, we are going to see more and more of these sins manifested! We are increasingly looking more like pagan Rome of Paul’s day rather than the Christian America of my parents’ generation. This ought to give us great concern. I don’t have that many more years left in this old world, but I sure am concerned about the world that my grandchildren are growing up in.

Folks, we see the terrible consequences of rejecting God. This should motivate us to do the opposite. We should seek to know, worship, and serve the true God. We ought to give thanks to Him often. Are you doing that? We should do what Paul says in Romans 12:9, “Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.”

Now in v.32 we reach the climax in Paul’s argument. Here we see:

⁹ A colon could come after “unrighteousness:”, in which case Paul is giving examples of unrighteousness.

¹⁰ For other list of sins see Matthew 15:19; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 1 Peter 2:1; 4:3.

III. THE FINAL PROOF OF THE GUILT OF MAN

Paul says in v.32, “Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” This is the climax of Paul’s argument of why God’s wrath is justified. Notice the 3 statements that Paul is making here:

A. Mankind Knows God’s Judgment Against Sin – Paul affirms that unbelievers know full well (*epiginosko*) “God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die....” Man has a conscience, an innate knowledge of the reality of sin and God’s judgment of it. God’s standards of righteousness are eternal and unchanging, a byproduct of His own moral being. For example, the law of God against murder is written on the consciousness of the entire human Race. The vast majority of people still believe it is wrong to cheat on your spouse. Even the worst criminals among us consider certain things to be wrong. Paul goes so far as to say that those who practice such sins “deserve to die.” That sounds rather strong. Yet somehow we all know deep inside that we are guilty before God and deserve death. We know God’s warning to Adam and Eve, “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). God’s sentence of death is not just temporal but also eternal. Most everyone has a sense of right and wrong and understands that wrong actions deserve punishment. That is why children accept punishment when they know they have done wrong. So parents, when your children do wrong, punish them! They will not hold it against you more than an hour or two. So God designed us with a conscience, and the knowledge that sin deserves punishment.

Back in 2008 [2/25] there was an episode of the Fox Network’s “The Moment of Truth.” They had the wife of a New York City cop on the show, and she had to answer a series of questions *truthfully* to get the prize money of \$100,000! Well, in answer to one question she admitted to cheating on her husband. She admitted to wanting to be married to another man. Yet she came away from the show with no prize money after being eliminated. Why was that? She was asked, “Are you a good person.” She said “yes,” but the polygraph detected a lie. Her conscience accused her of her guilt, and she could not hide it. She lost \$100,000 in prize money for lying!

So people know they are guilty before God, and that sin condemns them to death:

B. Yet, They Keep Doing these Sins - In spite of the fact that we know deep inside our consciousness that God is righteous and judges sin, we read in the middle of v.32 that they “do them,” or we can say “practice them” since the verb is a present tense. This knowledge does not prevent these same persons from indulging the sins which they know merit the judgment of God. Why is it that people keep doing things they know are harmful? It’s because sin is a terrible master. It controls and condemns us. We need Someone greater than ourselves to save us.

Finally, Paul saves the most hideous accusation for the end. Men and women are guilty before God because:

C. They Even Give Approval unto Sin – Paul says in the last of v.32, they “not only do them but give approval [*suneudokeo*] to those who practice them.” These Romans to whom Paul was writing to go to the Roman Colosseum where the bloodthirsty crowds applauded the killing of human life. Yet Paul implies the way it ought to be. There ought to be clear condemnation and disapproval of sin by others. Mom and dad ought to teach morals and take a strong stand against

sin. A person's peer group ought to disapprove of sin and wrong. Certainly a person's *church* ought to be a clear voice against all kinds of wrong. The community ought to come out against all kinds of sin and crime. The nation ought to pass laws against all kinds of evil. In such an environment people may go ahead and sin, but they will know that what they are doing is wrong, and they will hide their sin, and keep it to themselves, for they do not have the approval of others. That's the way it *ought* to be, and that is pretty much how it was in America 50 years ago.

But iniquity grows when it meets with no inhibition from the disapproval of others. That's the situation we are facing today, and thus we are experiencing a terrible moral slide in this country. Mom and dad too often are not going to church, they are not teaching right from wrong and disciplining their children. They are too busy smoking, cussing, drinking, gambling, and even running from one lover to another. We have some parents today who even enable their teens to have beer parties and encourage immorality. We have peer groups today that not only fail to discourage sin, but they even encourage others to sin, and applaud the most daring sinners in their group. When someone talks about getting stoned, or getting in a fight, or having immoral sex, their peers applaud them instead of rebuke them. Most states actually sponsor gambling, and thus encourage the sin of greed (v.29)! We have Supreme Court justices that say it is OK to kill your unborn baby. Many government policies actually reward bad behavior. We have an entertainment industry that is constantly sending the message of approval of all kinds of sinful activities. No wonder our country is getting into such a mess. Crime has escalated. Deaths from drug overdoses exceeded 100,000 last year. Why is that? We are doing *exactly* what Paul says in v.32, and that is the ultimate expression of evil in the heart of man. If we do not quit rejecting God and His moral standards, we are going to reap some terrible consequences.

Conclusion: So the apostle Paul has conclusively demonstrated that the heathen Gentile is guilty before God. Yet as we look at America today, we see much of Romans 1 played out right before our eyes. Most say they believe in God, but they believe in a false god rather than the One true God revealed in the Bible. Most have examined the God of the Bible and have rejected Him. Most have normalized just about any state of being or activity based on subjective feelings and opinions rather than the objective standards of righteousness found in God's Word. As a result, our society is becoming more and more depraved in both mind and morals.

What should we do? The apostle Peter said in Acts 2:40, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Is anyone here tired of the unfulfilled life, and life of unsatisfied desires? Well I invite you to turn to Jesus. He said in John 4:14, "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst." He gives living water that truly satisfies. Is anyone here tired of a life of sin? Don't accept it as normal and desirable. Seek to know the One true God. Love Him. Worship Him. Serve Him. Obey Him. He sent His Son to die on the cross for your sins. He will forgive you and set you free from the power of sin if you repent of sin and place your faith in Him. He will help you live a good and godly life, a life that is truly satisfying and full of love, peace and joy.

We believers cannot change society all at once. We can only do so one person at a time. If we change people, we can change society. Let us commit ourselves to being a witness of Christ to an ungodly generation. Share your faith. Invite others to church. Let's do what we can to turn the tide of the moral slide to destruction as a nation. We also see from this text of Scripture that there is a great need to send the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide*

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