

The Heathen Without Excuse

Romans 1:18-23

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In Romans 1:18-23, Paul says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.” Note that. When we think about the heathen in the jungle, who don’t follow God, “They are without excuse.” All mankind is without excuse.

Verse 20, “Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts...” or “their reasoning became empty” “...and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.”

When you read verses like this you think, Where do I start?!

In context, Paul has completed the introduction to Romans, which is its salutation, verses 1-7; his personal communication, verses 8-15; and his transition to the main theme, which is the Gospel or the good news, verses 16-17.

So that we will have a context, go back to verse 16. Paul said, “I am not ashamed.” That is a backhanded way of saying, “I glory in the Gospel.” He said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power...” or “dunamis” in the Greek “...of God to salvation for everyone who believes...” not behaves “...for the Jew first and also for the Greek” or Gentile. “For in it...” referring to the Gospel “...the righteousness of God is revealed.” That is the contrast with verse 18, which says, “The wrath of God is revealed.” We have “The righteousness of God is revealed,” and then we come immediately to “The wrath of God is revealed.”

As powerful as the Gospel is, there is one thing that it cannot do; that is, it cannot save a man who doesn’t see himself as a guilty, lost, condemned sinner. The Gospel can save no one who doesn’t believe that they need a Savior. We first have to see our need for the Gospel before we are going to receive and be transformed by the Gospel.

Having announced the universal Gospel, Paul now proceeds to show that there is a universal need for that Gospel. This is what we will see Paul doing as we study Romans in the next few weeks. He announced the Gospel; now he announced the need for the Gospel. He will show us what the Gospel is and can do. This is our need and the reason why we so desperately need the Gospel.

God sent His Son because the world is lost in sin. Man’s need of salvation is seen in the simple

fact that God sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. The angel Gabriel told Mary, “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus came to save us from our sins. If we don’t see ourselves as sinners in need of salvation, we’re not going to be receptive to the Gospel.

Someone said, “If no one is drowning, why launch the lifeboat? If no one is sick, why send for the doctor? If no one is lost, why preach the Gospel?” The common view today is that no one is lost. That thinking has actually come into the church. “You’re okay; I’m okay.” There are preachers on TV who don’t want to say anything negative; they’re the “happy preachers.” They just speak happy, good thoughts. They feel that people are already beaten down enough, so they want to build them up by only teaching happy thoughts.

That is not faithfulness to the Word of God. A preacher must be faithful to preach all the counsel of God. If it includes the wrath of God, then we preach on the wrath of God. What the Bible speaks, we speak. The Bible is the Word of God.

One of the problems in our culture today is that we don’t want the bad news. We only want the good news. We have a weakness of preaching in the pulpits today; we don’t share sin or the wrath of God. The Bible speaks more about the wrath of God than it does the love of God. All through Scripture the wrath of God is revealed. So the bad news must come first before we share the good news that we need the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The wrath of God will be our subject for the next three to four weeks. Can you imagine if this was advertised on the marquee of a church?! “Sermon This Sunday: The Wrath of God.” Would people be packing out the church to hear “The Wrath of God”? But being faithful to the Scriptures means being faithful to preach on the subject of the wrath of God.

Now we come to the first doctrinal section of Romans called Condemnation—The Wrath of God Revealed. Before the righteousness of God is revealed in salvation, verse 17, we must see that God’s wrath needs to be revealed, Romans 1:18-3:20. There is a question being asked: “Is the world lost?” The answer is “Yes; all the world is guilty before God.” In Romans 3:19, Paul says, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.”

So in this section, Paul will show that the pagan Gentile, without the Scriptures, is guilty before God. The moral man or the moralist is guilty and needs the Gospel; he is a sinner. The Jew or religious man is also guilty and is a sinner. And the whole world is guilty before God—“every mouth may be stopped.”

This is not a very pretty picture, but it is important for us to understand. It’s as though Paul is saying, “Hear ye! Hear ye! Court is now in session!” The first group he calls into the courtroom are the pagans or heathen Gentiles. These are the nonreligious, and they are guilty before God, even though they did not have the law of God or the Word of God. They still had God’s creation and their conscience, which God gave them in their own hearts. Verse 20 says that “They are

without excuse.”

I want to give you the two reasons, from the text, that the heathen are “without excuse.” Number one, “They knew God,” but they “suppress the truth.” Verses 18-20 deals with ungodliness. Verses 21-23 deals with unrighteousness. Ungodliness is our rebellion against God, and unrighteousness is being out of right with man. So it deals with our relationship to God and to man.

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them” in their conscience. “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.” In verse 19 you have the conscience, and in verse 20 you have creation. Those are the two witnesses that God has given to pagan man.

I want to lift some phrases out of the text to note. In verse 18, it’s “suppress the truth”; in verse 19, “known of God is manifest”; in verse 19, “God has shown it to them”; in verse 20, “clearly seen, being understood”; and in verse 21, “although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God.”

What does it mean that “They knew God”? They didn’t know Him in the sense of redemption or salvation. They knew of Him in the sense that they had a conscience and they also had creation, both of which witnessed to Him. It is a general revelation in our conscience and in creation. So God has given every human being at least a twofold revelation of Himself.

God cannot be known apart from revelation. You cannot by searching find God. God must come to you. God is infinite and transcendent. You cannot just go out there and find God. God has to come to you.

The greatest revelation, which is special revelation, was Him sending His Son, who is God in the flesh. Jesus became man and declared the Father to us. So God revealed Himself in His Son. The Bible is a special revelation from God. But if you don’t have the Bible, you do have a conscience and creation. Even the most primitive man can understand that there is a right and there is a wrong in the conscience. So God’s wrath is revealed, in verse 18; in verse 19, it says, “in them”; and in verse 20, creation tells of the Godhead and God’s power.

God’s wrath “is revealed.” What is “the wrath of God”? I’ll tell you first what it is not. It’s not an impulsive outburst of anger aimed capriciously at people God does not like.

We have road rage today. Have you ever had to change lanes, there is plenty of room to get over and it seems that when you put your blinker on and start to move over, someone speeds up into that lane to keep you from moving over and they lay on the horn. If ever I could get in the flesh—which I can, but thank God I’ve never burst into a road rage!

God doesn't do road rage. He doesn't get all mad. "I'm havin' a bad day! And I've just got to find a sinner to throw a lightning bolt at! I'm just so upset with them! There's a good one there!" Zap! There's a puff of smoke that used to be a sinner. We've heard of Jonathan Edward's sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. We like that—an angry God.

God's wrath is not capricious. God can never and will never violate His nature. God is love. Everything God does is loving. God is also righteous, holy and just. We can't just pick and choose what God is. "My God is all love. He's not a God of wrath." You can't pick and choose what you like or don't like about God. Every aspect of God's nature—even His wrath—is holy. His wrath is a holy, righteous wrath. It is a wrath motivated by love of mankind and a hatred of sin. So God's wrath is not an emotional, out-of-control anger.

What then is "the wrath of God"? It is described as a settled, determined response of a righteous God against sin. God is holy and righteous, and His wrath is a holy hostility to evil. It's a refusal to condone evil or to come to terms with it. Rather, it is His just judgment upon it.

If you had a judge who had someone before him guilty of a crime, and under the law, the judge activated that penalty, does that make the judge unrighteous? No. A righteous judge will implement the penalty that is due the crime.

God is a righteous judge; He is fair, equitable and holy. He has a hatred of sin. He must judge sin. And it is seen throughout all of Scripture. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, God rained down fire and brimstone from heaven that consumed those cities (Genesis 19). And God sent the flood to wipe out all flesh upon the earth because of sin (Genesis 7).

It's funny that we decorate our children's nurseries with pictures of Noah and the ark and the rainbow. And we see a giraffe with a happy smile looking out of the ark. God destroyed the whole world in the flood! This is the story of God's judgment and God's wrath! What's with that?! In the Bible, it is held up as a reminder that God did it once and He can do it again.

When I watch the news and I see the wickedness and darkness in the world today, I think God did it once and He will do it again. The wrath of God is not only being revealed right now but will be revealed. We reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7). At Calvary when Jesus died on the Cross, He drank the cup of the wrath of God so that we could be forgiven.

We also know that God's wrath is future, and the source of wrath is God. In Revelation 9-19, the wrath of God will be poured out on a Christ-rejecting world. The church will be caught up to be with the Lord in heaven before, I believe, the seven years of tribulation and before the Lord comes back in His Second Coming. God has not appointed the church to wrath but to obtain salvation.

I want to point out some important things from verse 18. The text says, "is revealed." That is in the present tense. So the better way to translate that is "being revealed." Not has been in the past or will be revealed. Right now it is being revealed. Next time we will see in three places where God "gave them up"; verse 24, verse 26 and verse 28. That is the wrath of God being

revealed right now. God lets us go our own, stubborn, rebellious way. He takes His hands off of us and lets us reap the results of our own sinfulness. "He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life" (Galatians 6:8).

Who is God's wrath against? Against two categories: "all ungodliness," which deals with our relationship to God, and "unrighteousness of men," which deals with our wickedness toward mankind. The root cause is that we are out of fellowship with God; we are ungodly. That results in us being unrighteous toward others.

Also in verse 18, it says they "suppress the truth" or "hold down the truth" in their unrighteousness. They don't want God, they don't want His standards of righteousness, because they want to live their own, sinful way. They know the truth, but they suppress it or hide it.

Someone said it was like a little boy whose mother told him, "Don't take your dog up to your bedroom." No doubt when his mom went to bed that night, he snuck out the back door, got his puppy, went up to his bedroom and tucked his dog in bed with him. He then heard his mom coming up the steps, so he quickly ran over to his toy box, opened the lid, put his dog inside, closed the lid and sat on it. That's what man does; he puts God in his proverbial toy box, closes the lid, sits on it and holds down the truth about God.

because of his conscience and creation, verse 20. Those are the ways God has spoken to mankind, even primitive mankind. So mankind is guilty and responsible because he knows God, and he knows there is a creator. Verse 19 says, "...because what may be known of God is manifest..." and here's the key verse "...in them, for God has shown it to them." Notice the "because" and the "for" in verses 18, 19, 20 and 21. So Paul is telling us why God can hold the unrighteous accountable.

Jiminy Cricket says, "Let your conscience be your guide." But he's not a theologian. Your conscience can be your guide—if your conscience is not seared, not resisting, not darkened. Most importantly, your conscience must be educated by the light of God's Word. A conscience is only as good as the light that shines upon it. Billy Graham once said, "Some men's consciences are like a wheel barrow; they take it wherever they want it to go."

So we can resist our conscience. We can pervert our conscience. Our conscience only works if it's educated by the light of God's Word. It's like a sundial. Can you imagine the days when people had to know what time it was by the sundial? What would they do in the dark?! You couldn't tell the time after dark.

That's why we will find out in this text that eventually man's mind no longer works. When you reject God, your mind no longer works. It becomes a reprobate mind or a broken mind. That's why in looking at the world around us, we say, "What are people thinking?! How could people do that?!" It's because their minds became reprobate, because they knew God, but they

rejected God in that they rejected their consciences and the witness of creation.

Creation, verse 20, is such a powerful witness of God. "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen..." this is in the cosmos "...being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." God may be invisible, but God made visible His power and His wisdom in creation.

Evolution is a folly of mankind. It is the theory that we evolved "from the goo to the zoo to you." It is believed you started as just a little speck, the freckle on the face of a horny toad, the sun hit it and it turned into an eye and had ears with a Rolex watch on. Then you drive away in your Mercedes-Benz.

Creation couldn't just happen. Where did it all come from? God created it. God, who is fiat spoke it into existence. And where did God come from? He didn't come from anywhere; He always has been. He is eternal. He is the eternal God.

Either you believe in an eternal God, or you believe in some form of eternal matter. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).

I don't have enough faith to be an atheist. "In the beginning, there was a bang." What bang? Where did that bang come from? Where did time and matter and space come from? It had to be created. The creation indicates there is a Creator. A work of art indicates an artist. Something built indicates that someone built it.

People often ask, "How will the heathen in the jungle be judged, when they don't have the revelation of the Bible or the Word of God?" I've always thought it interesting that so many atheists are worried about the guy in the jungle. Why don't you go share the Gospel with them if you're so worried about them?! The people in the jungle have a conscience and they have creation; they can look into the heavens and see that there is a God.

Creation is what's known as God's "general revelation." Psalm 19 is the classic passage on general revelation of God in creation. David said, "The heavens declare..." they are speaking "...the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork." If you want to see the handiwork of God, go out at night and look at the glory of God. "Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge." You have the heavens declaring, speaking and revealing knowledge. "There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard." God is speaking a universal language. "Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun." So heathen mankind, the pagans, are "without excuse."

His eternal power and His nature or the Godhead, verse 20. The creation reveals a Creator. The natural reveals the supernatural. The visible reveals the invisible. So "They are without excuse." We get our word "apology" from the word "excuse."

So there is no justification for atheism, agnosticism and skepticism. It is willful, deliberate

rebellion of turning from God. They “knew God” but they “suppress the truth” and don’t surrender to the knowledge of God.

A foundational truth is that knowledge brings responsibility. God will not judge the heathen for what they don’t know; God will judge them for what they do know. Light given brings much responsibility. The more revelation God gives you, the more you are responsible for it. So God will not judge the heathen based on the fact they didn’t have the Bible. God will judge them on the fact they violated their own conscience and their rejection of God’s witness in creation.

The second section of our text is verses 21-23. They are without excuse “because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God,” and they perverted the truth. Not only did they “suppress the truth,” but they perverted or twisted it. They couldn’t just leave the truth alone; they had to pervert it.

They started with a knowledge of God. Religion is not a creation of mankind. Man is a religious creature. He didn’t invent religion. Christianity is God coming to man and revealing Himself.

Now watch the steps going down. “...nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” We get the words “moron” or “moronic” from the word “foolish.” “Professing to be wise...” it’s our word “sophisticated” “...they became fools...” they became educated beyond their understanding and did not want to retain God in their knowledge “...and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.”

You see how man starts with God and ends in rebellion and is separated from God. Mankind is ungodly and unrighteous. When you watch the world around you, you have to see it through the lens of Scripture. Why are we so sinful and evil? Because we are fallen in our nature and in rebellion against God.

I want to point out these downward steps. First is indifference, verse 21. “Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God.” They became indifferent. The New Living Translation said, “They wouldn’t worship Him as God.”

Second, they gave themselves to ingratitude. They went from indifference to ingratitude: “nor were thankful.”

Third, verses 21-22, it led to their ignorance. We will see next time that it will lead to a reprobate mind, a mind that does not work. The New Living Translation says, “They began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became darkened and confused. Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools.” So they took the knowledge of God and became ignorant by perverting it.

Fourth, it led to idolatry, verse 23. They “changed...” That’s the problem. They couldn’t just leave God alone; they had to change God. They changed God to be like themselves “into an image made like corruptible man.” They carved statues of a man and made it their God. They

were innate objects that could not see, hear, talk or walk, but they considered them their God. Then they degenerated to worshipping “birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.” So they ended up in idolatry.

This is where mankind ends up. The Ten Commandments start with “You shall have no other gods before Me.” They violate that commandment. Then it leads to, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image” of God. They turned to idolatry. The folly of idolatry will lead to immorality. We are going to see how mankind, in his unrighteousness, has fallen so far from God that his mind no longer works.

So how can sinful man get right with a holy, righteous God? There is only one way: Jesus Christ. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). We need the Gospel.