

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 15, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 1:18-32

MAN — INNOCENT OR GUILTY? (i)

You remember the old remark, “I’ve got some good news and some bad news.” Paul says, “First, the bad news, SIN.” And in the first few chapters of Romans, Paul shows why each of us needs God’s salvation.

If you go to a jewelry store to look at diamonds, they usually lay the gems on a piece of black velvet. Why do they do that? They do it to highlight the brilliance of the diamonds. And that’s exactly what Paul has in mind when he launches into this first section of his letter. He’s going to get to the good news in due course, which is SALVATION, but he starts off with the black velvet. We need help! He knows that we will appreciate salvation all the more when we realize where we’ve got to come from.

Try to imagine a courtroom scene:

The **Case** is — man’s guilt or innocence before God.

The **Charge** is — that man has deliberately rejected God.

The **Prosecutor** is the Apostle Paul.

The **Accused** are all of humanity.

The **Defense** is that we’re all “without excuse.”

The **Evidence** is what we’re going to look at now (vs. 19-32), and

The **Verdict** is the death penalty, exactly what we deserve.

Look at verse 18: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of man...” So Paul starts right off with “the wrath of God.” What do you think of when I say, “The wrath of God”? Probably Sodom and Gomorrah, Judgment Day, hell fire and brimstone. That is part of the wrath of God, but that’s not the “wrath” that Paul is talking about here. Notice that it is in the present tense: “The wrath of God is being revealed...” It’s happening right now. Brimstone isn’t falling on us, but a lot of bad things are happening in the world. So how is the wrath of God being revealed now?

Remember that our idea of wrath is different from God’s idea. When we think of wrath, we think of someone becoming enraged, violent, and out of control. But the Greek word for “wrath” that Paul uses here literally means “controlled anger.” It’s *not* impulsive. God never loses control.

Now, why does God get angry? Well, it’s part of His righteousness. God gets angry at

sin. When you see someone doing something terribly wrong to someone else, does that make you angry? I hope it does. We have all witnessed the fierce anger of Fred Goldman caused by the brutal murder of his son. You see, if you don't get angry about anything, you don't have any love, because one expression of love is that you get angry at injustice and brutality because you *care* about what it does.

And God gets angry because sin destroys lives; it damages what God has made. God made this perfect world, and yet He sees it being devastated by wars and violence and injustice and every form of unspeakable iniquity. Of course, God becomes angry. If He didn't, He wouldn't be worth worshipping. If then "grace" is God acting graciously, "wrath" must be God reacting in revulsion against sin. His wrath is His holy hostility to evil, His refusal to condone it or come to terms with it, His just judgment upon it.

Notice **the object of God's wrath**, Paul uses two words to explain this. God's wrath is being revealed against (1) godlessness and (2) wickedness. Let me give you the definition of these two words, because you're not going to understand this passage unless you understand the meaning of these words.

(1) Godlessness. It means living as if God doesn't exist. Now, that is not necessarily atheism. It doesn't mean you don't believe in God. You may believe in God, but you don't believe He makes any difference. It's called "secularism" today. "God's there, but that doesn't have anything to do with me."

(2) Wickedness, on the other hand, means living without any rules. It means "doing your own thing" regardless of the consequences to yourself or to others.

Now, "godlessness" is a sin against God. "Wickedness" is a sin against man. That's the difference. And in the rest of Romans 1 we see that "godlessness" is discussed in verses 19—23 and "wickedness" in verses 24—32. So, in this courtroom scene Paul says, "Man is guilty, and he's guilty on three counts of godlessness, and he's guilty on three counts of wickedness. Notice that godlessness comes before wickedness. Why? Because if your vertical relationship (with God) is not right, your horizontal relationship (with your fellow man) is not going to be right. If you're not right with God, you're going to be at loggerheads with other people.

(1) Paul says that mankind is guilty of GODLESSNESS — that is, trying to live as though God doesn't exist. Notice the first thing he says is that God has "revealed" Himself. In verse 19 we read, "... what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them." What is God saying? — three things: I have revealed Myself to man, and

(a) "My revelation is unmistakable." It's plain to see. He's talking about nature. He says, "Go out and look at the stars." Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God." People say, "I feel so close to God out in nature." God *is* seen through nature. You remember the Russian cosmonaut who said, "I searched for God up there; I didn't see Him, and therefore there is no God." And all the atheists said, "Right on!" Some weeks later John Glenn went up and circled the earth three times, and when he came down he said, "I saw God everywhere!" God is revealed unmistakably in nature if we look for Him honestly and sincerely.

(b) “My revelation is universal.” Verse 20 says, “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.” The evidence is overwhelming. All of creation points to the fact that there is a God. No matter where you live on Planet Earth you can look up and see the sun, moon and stars. Whether you’re educated or uneducated, it’s obvious, it’s unmistakable, it’s universal.

What does creation teach us about God?

(i) It says that **He is eternal**. If you go out and look at the solar system and the far-off galaxies, you think: “Somebody designed all this!” But you don’t have a design without a Designer, or a creation without a Creator. People say, “Well, it just happened by accident.” That’s like saying, “I could take my watch all apart and put the pieces in a paper bag and shake that bag until my watch would be reassembled.” In fact, the odds of that happening are better than the odds of everything in the universe just happening by accident. And if Somebody created all this, that means He had to be here before the creation. So God is eternal, and we learn that by looking at nature.

(ii) It says that **God is powerful**. Obviously, He had to be big enough to create all this. I mean, have you created any galaxies lately? That takes quite a bit of energy, doesn’t it? And then,

(iii) It says that **God is organized**. **When you look** through a telescope at the universe or through a microscope at a growing cell, you can see exquisite organization. And Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:33 that “God is not a God of disorder...”

Now, obviously this is just a partial picture of God. Seeing God in nature is called “General Revelation.” But it takes “Special Revelation” as found in the Bible to assure us that God is personal and loving. But we *do* learn from nature that He is eternal and powerful and that He’s here. So, His revelation in nature is unmistakable and universal. And then, God says,

(c) “My revelation is undeniable.” He says that “men are without excuse.” We have no defense; the case is air-tight; the evidence is overwhelming. The N.E.B. says, “There is no possible defense for their conduct.” Have you ever heard someone say, “Well, what about the Aborigine who has never heard about God?” Granted he doesn’t have a full understanding of God. But every human being is without excuse because at least we’ve got creation, and that presupposes a Creator, and even the Aborigine can know *that* much about God. Do you know that they have never found a civilization of atheists? The religion may be distorted, but archaeologists tell us that they have never unearthed a city without some kind of temple or worship area. There’s a natural desire in man to worship. Why? Because God made us that way. Many people, of course, don’t like to admit that God has revealed Himself, because that makes us accountable to Him.

Now, notice what man does with this revelation — and this is where Paul starts to build his case against humanity. He says that man has taken this revelation of God in nature, and man

does three things with it:

A. **Man SUPPRESSES the truth about God.** This is Exhibit A in Paul's court case against humanity. Look what he says in verse 18: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." They try to ignore and bury the truth. The Greek verb means to "hold down" or "restrain," as a wrestler tries to pin his opponent's shoulders to the mat.

What was the big problem concerning Watergate in the 1970s? It wasn't the break-in; it was the cover-up. And slowly but relentlessly it was uncovered. And Paul says that people are intellectually dishonest by trying to cover up and suppress the truth. They don't want people to know about God. You say, "Pastor, how does that happen?" Well, tell me, does the average educator like to include the creation story in a school textbook alongside the evolutionary hypothesis? Of course not. Indeed, the Supreme Court has forbidden it. Isn't it interesting, too, that at Christmas time the children can sing Christmas songs in school so long as they don't mention Jesus?! They can sing "Jingle Bells" and "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth," but they can't sing "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem." Why? Because men suppress the truth. They complain about "those Christians who are always butting into our winter holidays! Fancy trying to bring religion into everything!" Men suppress the truth. But more than that,

B. **Man REJECTS the truth about God.** Verse 21 says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God, nor gave thanks to Him." Paul says there are a couple of ways in which humanity rejects God:

- **We refuse to give God the glory that is due to Him.** We feel that we are self-sufficient. Some people would rather believe that all of creation took place by accident than give glory to God the Creator.

Let me give you an insight into philosophy, because I majored in philosophy at the university. Never study the teachings of a philosopher without studying that person's biography. Never read a person's system of philosophy without finding out the quality of his lifestyle. For instance, when you study Communism, find out who Karl Marx was. When you study rational skepticism, find out what really happened to Voltaire. When you study psychology, read the biography of Sigmund Freud and tell me that guy was balanced! You see, a man's lifestyle determines his philosophy. So often people have a certain lifestyle and then they create a philosophical system to excuse the way they want to live. Freud had an incestuous relationship with his mother. That has been carefully documented. Hence his outlandish views on sexuality. Karl Marx had a venereal disease and was going insane. Friedrich Nietzsche, who coined the "God is dead" slogan, was dying of V.D., and he committed suicide at age 56. Men not only suppress the truth, but they reject the truth about God as well.

- And the other thing Paul says is that **we refuse to give God thanks.** Ingratitude is an offense against God. Why? Because no matter who you are, you can be grateful. The savage in the jungle can be grateful. Ingratitude is ungodliness. Tell me, does it hurt you when you do

something for someone, and he doesn't even say "Thank You"? One thing that makes me see red is when I let some guy get into my lane in front of me in heavy traffic, and he doesn't even raise his hand to acknowledge the courtesy. By the way, women never do that; they have class!

And God says, "I've created all this, and blessed you abundantly, and you're so ungrateful." You remember how Jesus healed ten lepers one day, and only one came back to thank Him (Luke 17:11-19). And that's about par for the course. About ten percent of people are truly grateful to God for their life and for all God gives them. And yet psychologists tell us that gratitude is the healthiest emotion you can have.

So, man suppresses the truth, and he rejects the truth, and then inevitably,

C. **Man REPLACES the truth.** There's a natural sequence here: First, you suppress the truth, then you reject it, and finally you replace it. Verse 22 says, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." Then in verse 25: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator..."

When we replace God with something else in our lives it's called idolatry. We make an idol for ourselves. Now, nature abhors a vacuum, and when people take God out of their lives, something's going to fill that vacuum — either a person, a thing, or an ideal — and we create our own little gods.

There are two kinds of idolatry: crude idolatry and cultured idolatry.

Think about crude idolatry. Some of us have been to countries where they worship idols of wood and stone, and we have seen these monstrosities in all shapes and sizes. And then they bring them to America and put them in museums, and folk go to museums to look at these hideous things that have replaced God, and they call them "works of art," when in fact they are an abomination to God.

But what about cultured idolatry? I ask you — what do we idolize today? The ancients worshipped Thor, the god of war; Bacchus, the god of wine; Venus, the goddess of sex; the Penates, the gods of home and hearth. Today we are more sophisticated. We worship the same gods; we just don't give them personal names! Military dictators worship war; millions make idols of liquor or sex or home and family. They bow down before wealth, success, physical beauty, pleasure, fame, rock stars and Elvis!

Anything that becomes "number one" in your life becomes your "god." Now, why does man create idols? Because he is selfish; he wants to be served, and he creates an idol to pray to so that he can get what he wants from it. He wants the idol to serve him. Materialism is idolatry, and the biggest idol of all can be ourselves.

Remember that the first two of the Ten Commandments forbid idolatry. Exodus 20:3-4 says, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol..." Nothing is to take the place of God in our lives.

So, Paul, in this courtroom case, says, “First, the bad news” — Man is guilty. Why? Because God has revealed Himself in nature, but man has suppressed the truth and rejected it and even replaced it.

And look at the result in verse 21: “Their thinking became futile.” You see, when you begin with a false premise, you’re going to arrive at a false conclusion. You can’t think clearly when you repudiate God.

Then he says, “Their foolish hearts were darkened.” Idolatry always produces superstition of one kind or another. What happens is — if you reject the light, you end up in darkness.

Paul continues in his description of these people: “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools” — educated fools, no doubt, but fools nevertheless. The Greek verb is “moraino” from which we get our word “moron.” So, if you don’t believe in God, or live as if He does not exist, you’re a moron!

Well, we’ve dealt with serious and profound theology this morning, and I think we ought to stop at this point and let you reflect upon and digest what we have been speaking about: **GODLESSNESS** — the tragedy of living as though God did not exist.

Perhaps we should all search our own hearts to see if there are still traces of godlessness in the inner recesses of our souls. Are there any “idols” in *your* life that mean more to you than the Lord Himself?

Do you ever put family or work or pleasure or money ahead of Jesus in your affections? Do business with the Lord this morning. Smash those idols to smithereens and crown Christ Lord of all!

I think of William Cowper’s famous hymn —

Oh for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb.

Does this second stanza reflect your condition?

Where is the blessedness I know
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?

Let us all make this next stanza the earnest response to the Word of the Lord we have heard this morning —

The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,
And worship only *Thee*.

AMEN.