

The Gospel as it Really Is: Romans Simply Explained

Romans 1:18-32

Everyone has turned away from God

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Introduction

Surrounded by fellow students, in my early twenties, one of them said to me - perhaps to provoke a response - "I don't believe in God!" To which I replied, "You **know** there is a God!" "No I don't!" he said, "Yes you do!" said I. And so pantomime-like, it went on "Yes you do know!" "No I don't know!"

An argumentative spirit never advances the Kingdom of God, but my young self had begun to understand the verses before us this morning, Romans 1:18-32 which teaches that everyone in the world does indeed know that God exists.

Sunday morning we're making our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, perhaps the most important book in the Bible. No other book unfolds the Good News of the Gospel as logically as Romans. Next Sunday, God-willing, I should say here, we plan to explore two phrases in this section, "the wrath of God" and "God gave them over;" but this morning I want to focus on three truths Paul teaches, and the first is, indeed:

Everyone in the World knows that God Exists

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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 people are without excuse."

God has spoken in two books, the book of Creation and the book of Scripture, the Bible. Not everyone in the world has access to the second book, the Bible, but everyone has read the book of Creation. There are many things about God which we can't learn from the book of Creation: Jupiter and Saturn and starlings and antelope and snow-capped mountains, don't reveal the love or grace or mercy of God, for example. But creation does reveal his existence—and even some of his invisible qualities!

"God must have **eternal power**" —"the Creator must be very powerful to make this vast universe with all the powerful forces that keep it together." (v.20)

"God must have a **divine nature**" - "the Creator can't be like humans — we can't make zebras or galaxies! - his nature must be different from ours."

Everyone knows that God exists! The evidence out there, the beauty, the complexity, the immensity of the universe together with the reasoning process in our minds, ensures that every human being knows there is a God. This is how it works: You and I have “forensic minds” which are always running from evidence to conclusion:

“A window is broken, beneath it are footprints” - we automatically conclude a robber has broken in

“A child has serious tooth decay, we see the child with sweets in his hand every day” - we conclude the sweets are the cause of the decay.

All the evidence of creation OUT THERE plus an amazing forensic mind IN HERE, automatically leads to the conclusion: there must be a God. And so convincing is this conclusion, says Paul, “people are without excuse!” No-one will be able to say to God, on the day of judgement, “This is the first time I knew of your existence.” What about “each little flow'r that opened, each little bird that sang: I made their glowing colours, I made their tiny wings” Remember “the cold wind in the winter, and the pleasant summer sun, the ripe fruits in your garden? well I made them, every one.” We all *know* God exists!

If I could replay that conversation of years ago, today, I would not be argumentative, never be argumentative; say something like this:

How do you explain the complexity of even one single cell? Inconceivable complexity in each of the 30 trillion cells that make up our body. According to the biochemist Stephen Meyer, even if the earth was 5 billion years old, that is not enough time for chance to develop even one small component of a cell. But vast complexity makes sense if a Great Mind was behind the cell.

How do you account for the fine tuning of the cosmos? At every level, from the kind of galaxy we inhabit, to the sort of star we orbit, to the kind of planet we live on, everything is fine-tuned for life on earth. How come? It makes a lot of sense if a good and Great Designer tweaked all the numbers to permit life on this planet.

How do you account for the human mind, for consciousness? You can't get mind from matter; they are two different sorts of things. Where did human consciousness come from? Again it makes sense if a conscious God made us in his likeness, in his image.

Everyone in the world has turned away from God

Verse 21 “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. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles... Verse 25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever

praised. Amen.”

The first and primordial tragedy of mankind is that they've turned away from the God they know exists; the God they were designed to know and love and find their ultimate joy and fulfilment in!

“They suppress the truth of God’s existence by their wickedness” - The image that comes to my mind is one of those buoyancy floats which naturally wants to pop to the surface. The only way to keep it under the water is to force it under it:

- “A beautiful spring day, there must be a God, no, no, no” - suppress the truth!
- “a new-born baby —what a miracle, no, no” - push the float under the water!
- “a young couple in love, must be a God, no, no—suppress the truth.”

They don’t “glorify him” - they don’t worship him, “God you are so great and mighty and powerful!” I was walking through a park this week; crocuses and daffodils: what an amazing Creator, I prayed! *“They don’t thank God”* Every day people receive numerous blessings from God’s good hand; the food they eat, the air they breathe, the rain that falls and the sun that shines, yet they never say “Thank you God!” Recently, I heard about a *Christian family* who never say “thank you” (cough cough!) before meals, not in Worcester/Malvern of course, that would never happen, would it?!

The *second tragedy of mankind* is that they turn to false, alternative gods. Many people in the West would dispute this, they would say “I don’t believe in ANY gods.” Not true, you and I were designed to be worshippers, we must worship, we will worship, and if it is not God, then it will be something or someone else:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls
You may be a construction worker workin' on a home
Might be livin' in a mansion, you might live in a dome
You may own guns and you may even own tanks
You may be somebody's landlord, you may even own banks
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody*

“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator who is for ever praised. Amen.” (25)

“We don’t carve blocks of wood into the shape of an animal, or make bronze castings in the shape of a reptile, put them on the mantle piece and pray to it each day! We westerners are too sophisticated for that sort of nonsense.”

What created things do western people worship instead? Money, houses, sport, alcohol, sex, science, education, democracy, drugs, hobbies, food, games, children, career, pleasure, family: the list of western idols is endless. An idol is someone or something we love dearly, turn to when we've got the blues, trust in when we are troubled.

Who do you worship?

- Everyone in the world knows that there is a God
- Everyone in the world has turned away from the God they know exists and now worships created things, which can never fill the empty God-shaped void of the human soul. It's a tragedy!

Everyone in the world has become corrupt

Terrible things happen when people turn away from God, there are bitter consequences when we turn away from the truth and the light.

Number 1, their thinking becomes futile. (verse 21) Their powers of reasoning go haywire: "their thinking became futile" (verse 21) "Although they claim to be wise, they became fools." (verse 22) "they exchange the truth of God for a lie" (verse 25)

It is surely, not surprising that mankind's reasoning powers have become defective? If someone constantly damages their reasoning process in one area of life by denying the conclusion their mind wants to make - namely that God exists — it's not surprising their reasoning process is shot up in every other area of reasoning?!

This is why we can never put our trust in human philosophers or influencers, whether Aristotle or Hume, Chomsky or Foucault, Joe Rogan or Kylie Jenner. Human minds are no longer capable of leading to truth!

Number 2, their hearts are darkened, verse 21. This is moral. Instead of loving what is good and wholesome, now they love what is actually horrible.

Number 3, their lives are filled with wickedness. Paul lists 22 sins in these verses. He is not saying that every one of them are found in every human being (although the seeds of them may be); no these 22 sins are found in every village, every city, every nation.

The first on the list are sexual sins. We can't help noticing that. Why does Paul highlight such sins? Because sexual sin is the signature wickedness of fallen humanity. If we think of the 22 sins as an iceberg of wickedness; sexual misdemeanours are the visible, obvious, most noticeable part of the frozen mass. But, as we know, *the whole* of an iceberg is dangerous.

It's easy to make two mistake with this list of 22 sins: to highlight sexual sins at the expense of the other 21, or to overlook sexual sin and focus only on the 21.

Verse 24: "...sexual impurity... the degrading of their bodies with one another. Verse 26, shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. Verse 28: a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. (Now the 21 sins:) 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, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy."

Every week that passes by, the news bears out this sad litany of destructive evil behaviour. And if you know your own heart well you will find sorrowful echoes of these sins there too.

The Gospel

"Preacher what a dark sermon!" How do I respond to that natural and understandable objection?

Remember the bad news is part of the good news! So we are obliged to proclaim the bad news, knowing that the whole Gospel the full Gospel is the power of God unto salvation:

"The main reason for the weakness of today's churches is that the Gospel that is believed in the pew and which is proclaimed ... bears little resemblance to the message of Romans" (Olyott p,6)

Now can you see why we need the Gospel?! Mankind is in such a terrible condition!

The Good News, says that in spite of our rebellion and sin, God still loves us! The Good New proclaims that God sent his Son into the world to stand in our place, to bear the punishment that should come to us when he died on the cross. "In our place condemned he stood, sealed our pardon with his blood."

And when the Gospel is faithfully preached—including the bad-news part of the good news—the powerful Holy Spirit uses it to change our hearts, renew our minds and start the life-long process of sanctifying us, making us holy and loving and good.

May God take these words and use them to convict of sin and bring salvation. Amen.