



SCRIPTURE STUDIES: ROMANS 1:18-23

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Romans 1:18-23 (ESV) -- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Some of you may remember back in 2015 when Steve Harvey messed up the Miss Universe announcement. Harvey mistakenly announced that Miss Columbia won the grand prize and honor of becoming Miss Universe. The Columbian was crowned, they gave her flowers, she was presented front stage and celebrated as the winner. But then someone told Harvey he made a mistake. The winner was Miss Philippines. Miss Columbia was the first runner up. So, in front of the whole world (and universe), Steve Harvey had to come back out on stage and make the correction. It was heartbreaking for Miss Columbia and embarrassing for Steve Harvey.

Here's my question: Why my make the correction at all? Why not save face and just allow everyone to think that Miss Columbia won? No would ever know. It would have saved a lot of hurt feelings and disappointment. Why not just keep it a secret? Here's why: it is wrong when we fail to honor the right person. It is equally wrong when we give the honor one person deserves to another. That's what our passage is about tonight. God is pouring out His wrath upon the wicked for not giving Him the honor He is due and ascribing that honor to other things.

Scriptural Context

- **Romans 1:1-7, 8-15, 16-17.** Paul introduced himself, his gospel and his ministry (V.1-7). He then expressed his gratitude for the church, desire to visit and his intentions when he got there (V.8-15). Paul then stated the content of his gospel (V.16-17). Now, he is going to unpack that gospel.
- **Romans 1:18-3:26.** This section is a universal condemnation of all men (c.f. 3:9, 19-20, 23). First, Paul indicts the gentiles (1:18-32 depicts idolatry, sexual immorality, homosexuality, ignorance of God's law), and then the Jews (2:1-3:8). Verse 18 is both the starting point and the summary of the section.
- **Why did Paul write this section in Romans?** He did not write in order to encourage repentance and faith like an evangelist would. The church in Rome already repented and believed. Paul's intention is to explain and clarify his gospel.
- **Application:** The church always needs clarity on the gospel. It has never been explained enough. RC Sproul always said the church's biggest problem is that we don't know who God is. I would add to that, we also don't know what the gospel is.

Point #1-God's Wrath is Revealed

Romans 1:18 (ESV) -- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

- **Explanation: The connection between verse 17 and 18.** How should we understand the relationship between verses 17 and 18? They are connected with the word "**for.**" It's more than a transitional word. There's a logical connection. I think it is helpful when we insert a question in between verse 17 and 18. Why is the saving righteousness of God (V.17) needed? Because the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven? Or you could say, why has God provided His saving righteousness (V.17)? To save people from His wrath.
- **The issue is righteousness.** God is righteous for inflicting His wrath upon ungodly people. The reason the saving righteousness of God is needed in the gospel (1:16-17, 3:21-26) is because man is unrighteous. God requires perfect righteousness, and man lacks it.
- **The gospel against the backdrop of wrath.** Another key reason, I believe, Paul introduces us to the wrath of God right away in his explanation of the gospel is

because good news is only good news against the backdrop of bad news (cancer diagnosis, basketball tryouts).

- **People are hardened against God's wrath.** Therefore, people don't care about the gospel. They don't understand the righteous wrath of God they deserved. Therefore, in your presentation of the gospel you must start with God, His Law and man's sin.
- **Sproul Quote.** "People today are not particularly concerned about the gospel because they do not know anything about the law of God, and they are not at all familiar with the revelation of his wrath. If people were sensitive to the manifestation of God's anger toward them, they would be so moved by enlightened self-interest that they would flee as fast as they could to hear the gospel, but their necks have become so hardened, their hearts so calcified, that they have no fear of God. People do not believe in God's wrath; they think he is incapable of it. They listen to preachers everywhere tell them that God loves them unconditionally, and when they hear that, they see no reason to fear his wrath."
- **Wrath Defined.** What does Paul mean by the wrath of God in this verse? In the Bible, God describes different forms of His wrath. It was God's wrath to flood the world and destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. It was God's wrath that He poured out upon Jesus for our sins. When Christ returns God will pour out His eschatological wrath upon His enemies. Sinners right now and in eternity future are enduring the eternal wrath of God in Hell. So, what does Paul mean here? First of all, we must acknowledge that wrath is a present reality.
 - **A Present Wrath.** God's saving righteousness is "**revealed**" today to believers. The word revealed in verse 18 is the same. It's a present-day reality as well.
 - **The wrath of abandonment.** Connect this idea with what Paul said in verse 24, 26, 28—God gave them up—this seems to be the wrath of abandonment. Because of man's willful rejection of God, God gives man over to sin and allows to become the moral monster he already is.
 - **Schreiner Quote.** "The moral desolation of human society is a result from the beginning of the world and continuing up to the present day is a manifestation of God's wrath" Schreiner
- **Examples of a degenerating society.** Trans, gays, schools, porn, corrupt government, etc.
- **Ungodly and unrighteous men.** The ones God is angry with is ungodly and unrighteous men. We tend to think of bad people here. But the terms ungodly and unrighteous are essentially the same thing. Paul is referring to people who

aren't godly. In our eyes, they may be nice people, but they aren't godly. They don't love God. They don't love His truth or His people.

- **Suppressing the truth.** The root of the Greek word translated "suppress" is katacain, which can also be translated as "to hinder," "to stifle," "to incarcerate," "to put in detention," "to obscure," or "to repress."
- **Sproul quote.** *"We might think of a gigantic spring or coil that would require all the strength in our body to push down or compress. While we are pushing it down, it is resisting our strength and seeking to spring back up and recoil into its original position. By nature we take the truth of God and press it down. We force it into our subconscious, as it were, to get it out of our mind; yet, despite all the strength we use to suppress it, we simply cannot eradicate it. We cannot get rid of it because it is always and everywhere pushing back up. The specific sin here is the suppression of truth."*

Transition: What truth is man suppressing? Paul tells us in verse 19.

Point #2-Man Rejects the Clear Knowledge of God

Romans 1:19 (ESV) -- *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.*

- **Explanation.** Paul is saying that God's wrath is revealed against ungodly men who suppress the truth, and this is right because God has clearly revealed Himself (limited but clear knowledge). Therefore, God expects men to acknowledge the truth concerning what God has revealed.
- **General/Natural Revelation.** This is what we call general or natural revelation. God has revealed Himself in what He created. We can discern certain attributes and characteristics of God from what the Lord has made. This is not a saving knowledge. A person cannot learn what is necessary to be right with God, but it is sufficient knowledge in that we should worship and honor God as a result of knowing what He has revealed. But man hasn't done this, and therefore God pours out His wrath.
- **It is plain to them.** It's the Greek word phaneros. apparent, clear, visible, manifest. Jesus told certain people He healed don't make me phaneros. Don't make me clearly known. God through creation is phaneros. This is not a hidden knowledge. This is not something that should be missed. My wife will ask me to get something out of the refrigerator. I don't see it. She has no compassion on me because not only is it there, but it is in plain sight. I have no excuse for missing it.

- **Quote.** Augustus Strong wrote, "The Scriptures ... both assume and declare that the knowledge that God is, is universal (Rom. 1:19–21, 28, 32; 2:15). God has inlaid the evidence of [that] fundamental truth in the very nature of man, so that nowhere is He without a witness."

Transition: How has God revealed Himself and what can we learn? Verse 20:

Romans 1:20 (ESV) -- *For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse.*

- **Explanation.** God is currently pouring out His wrath on ungodly, truth suppressing sinners. Why? Because they have rejected the knowledge of God that He plainly revealed. How did God plainly reveal this knowledge and what specifically is this knowledge? God has revealed His eternal power and divine nature (that's broad). These things have been clearly perceived ever since time began through the creation. God's nature is revealed in what He has made.
- **God is the Creator.** This verse says nothing about God's love, mercy and grace being revealed. But we can understand that God is the Creator. He must be eternal since He made all things and predates all things. He must be omnipotent to be able to create all things.
- **Universal knowledge.** Paul isn't saying this is a great apologetic argument. He is saying that God has clearly and sufficiently revealed Himself to all men. And though people must observe the natural world to understand these things, they don't have to do so for long. God has made man in such a way that knowledge of the Creator is built into the very fabric of our being. We know and recognize God's existence instinctively.
- **Concurrent knowledge and rejection.** The unbeliever knows God exists and rejects His existence at the same time. Which raises the question: Are atheists being genuine? To say yes would reduce Paul's meaning of knowledge to the subconscious. They know deep down inside that God exists but have repressed that knowledge. To say no, they are not being genuine when they claim to not believe in God would mean that all atheists are knowingly lying. I believe both are true. Some atheists truly believe there is no God, but that doesn't mean they don't have knowledge of God. They have suppressed that knowledge so deeply that they truly believe they don't believe. Others claim to not believe but know God truly exists.
- **Without excuse (a defense, apologia).** No matter the mental condition of the individual, no man will be able to legitimately say that they didn't know God

existed. No one stand before the tribunal of God and say, you didn't provide enough information for me to believe in you.

- **What about people who have heard of Jesus?** Sproul would often get the question, what about the poor innocent man in the jungle who has never heard about Jesus? What happens to him when he dies? Sproul would say, he goes straight to heaven, because innocent men don't need a Savior. Only sinners need a Savior. The problem with that question is that there are no innocent men. There are only guilty men. Jesus came into a world that was already under the indictment of God. The sinner won't go to Hell because he never heard about Jesus. He will go to Hell because the One he did know (God), he rejected.

Point #3-Man Degenerates into Moral and Spiritual Depravity

Romans 1:21 (ESV) -- For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

- **Explanation.** Why are they without excuse before the judgment seat of God? Because even though they knew God existed, and that He deserved honor and glory as the Creator, they did not give him such. As a result, they became futile in their thinking and their hearts were darkened.
- **Fallen men know God.** By definition, the unbeliever doesn't know God savingly. But here Paul says he does know God. He means that the information about God is getting through to his mind, but he still rejects it.
- **Good faith atheists.** Does this mean every atheist is a liar? They claim to be an atheist but really, they believe in God? There are some like that, but many atheists truly think that God doesn't exist. So how do they know God? They bury the truth of God in their subconscious. They suppress the truth. This is not an intellectual issue. It's a spiritual and moral issue. Atheists aren't merely rejecting a propositional statement that God exists. The militant atheists certainly are. But the average atheist is rejecting a reality, a worldview, a subjective intuition. "There must be more to life. I know life has more purpose. I know life doesn't end at death." The good faith atheists is suppressing that. Atheists use their darken mind to reject God.
- **What is the subconscious mind?** It is knowledge in our brains that we aren't immediately aware of until we are forced to think about it. For example, you have knowledge how to drive a car or ride or bike but that knowledge won't be accessed until you're doing those things. Atheists, therefore, have inner

knowledge of God. And the truth of God needs to be spoken to them so their conscious is pricked.

- **The Nihilist girl at AA.** I remember one time at an AA meeting a girl said she used to be a nihilist. A nihilist is an atheist who actually lives out their beliefs. Most atheists have to borrow from the Christian view of morality and truth. The nihilist understands that if God doesn't exist, there is no truth or meaning to life. This girl understood that and she lived out her beliefs. As a result, she nearly destroyed her life through drugs, sex, alcohol and all kinds of sin.
- **God deserves glory.** The logical conclusion from knowing the Creator is that we should honor and thank Him. We should honor Him for His inherent worth and value. We should honor Him for His incredible works in Creation. We should also thank Him for every good gift He's given us. The right mind would recognize that God has bestowed upon us every good gift. The unbeliever is at enmity with God for failing to do these things. The unbeliever doesn't honor God. Instead, he honors himself. The unbeliever doesn't thank God. Instead, he takes credit for the good things in his life.
- **Why honor and thanks?** Because this hits on the worth and value of God. God deserves it.
- **Illustration.** Neb took credit for his kingdom (Dan. 4: God robbed him of his sound mind. When he came to his sense he honored the Lord as God.
- **The result of unbelief: Futile thoughts and darkened minds.** When the unbeliever fails to acknowledge God's existence, and, as a result, then, give Him honor and thanks, God causes that person to have futile thinking and a darkened heart. Their futile thinking and darkened hearts is tied into their suppression.
- **Our nation today.** Why do you think people in our nation today have lost their minds? Why is a school board in Michigan discussing putting a litter box in a classroom because one their students identifies as a cat? Men are dressing like girls and girls like men. We let perverts into the bathrooms with our kids. We protect the eggs of bald eagles but kill our own babies. We celebrate pornography and promiscuity and wonder why rape and assault are so prevalent. Our colleges are supposed to be places where ideas are exchanged; instead, we need safe zones to protect our kids from dissenting opinions. The unvaccinated are treated like lepers. School teachers have turned into social activists. We've turned library education into drag queen story hour. Homosexuals adopt babies and call it a family. Drug use and prostitution are legal and called good. Men dominate women's sports. Women forsake motherhood in the name of liberty. Our suicide and overdose rate have never

higher; yet we still call this the land of free. Why has America lost its mind? Because we have rejected God.

Which is why in verse 22 Paul says,

Romans 1:22 (ESV) -- Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

- **Explanation.** Despite the fact that the unbeliever has futile thinking and a darkened mind, they claim to be wise. They claim to be intelligent; nevertheless, they are fools.
- **Wise fools.** They are fools in the eyes of God and every Bible believing Christian. Richard Dawkins may claim to be one the foremost scientists in the world, and people may think he is really smart, but the Bible calls him a fool. Christopher Hitchens was my favorite atheists. I love listening to him speak, but even though he seemed intelligent, and in many respects is, he was fool.
- **Fool is a moral term in Scripture.** When the Bible calls someone a fool, it is not merely calling someone foolish or stupid. It is doing that. But it is also calling someone wicked. The wicked man says in his heart there is no God (Ps. 14:1).
- **What is true wisdom?** Because true wisdom and knowledge begins with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7). Knowledge apart from God is like...

Romans 1:23 (ESV) -- and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

- **Explanation.** The unbeliever in his rejection of God is given over to idolatry. Man will worship something. The question is what. If he doesn't worship God and honor His glory, man will worship the creation.
- **OT allusions.** There is not a direct quote from the OT in this verse, but Paul does seem to allude to Psalm 106:20 and Jeremiah 2:11 and Deut. 4:15-18.
 - **Psalm 106:20.** The context is Israel's history: rejection of God. The result was idolatry. Man must worship someone or something. We were made to worship.
 - **Jeremiah 2:11.** When we reject God we turn to worthless things.
- **We become what we behold.** TV shows. Psychology. Friendships.
- **Manmade religion.** Man is not naturally godly, but he is naturally religious. Man is a worshiper. And because of sin, and his rejection of the One true God, man makes up his god and worships idols. Many people have said, religion is man's way of making sense of a chaotic and complex world, but the Bible says religion is man's downgrade away from truth and the One true God. People look at

religion as a path of righteousness, but the Bible says it is the path of sin and ungodliness. People say religion is man's way to God. The Bible says religion is the devil's way to Hell. The world sees religious people as wise. The Bible calls them fools. The world sees religious people as holy. God says they are defiled.

- **John MacArthur Quote.** "The clear testimony of Scripture is that human religion of every sort, whether simple or highly sophisticated, is a downward movement away from God, away from truth, and away from righteousness. Contrary to much thinking, men's religions do not reflect their highest endeavors but their lowest depravity."