

The Reason for Unbelief **Romans 1:19-23**

As we concluded last week, we saw that the wrath of God is a reality. In the classical, medieval, and even early modern period, this was easy enough to believe because, to quote Thomas Hobbes, life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” Hobbes, *Leviathan*. However, most people in the Western world today, blessed as they are with sufficient food supply, adequate housing, sophisticated medicine, and life expectancies into the 80s, imagine God as a God of love only.

Our world prefers a God Who might have rules, but in the end we would like a God Who welcomes everyone into heaven with open arms, applauding them for their efforts, no matter how insignificant or futile. After all, it is a creed of our modern culture to have everyone win. Everyone must be included. No one must be left out. But that simply is not the God that is revealed to us in Scripture. Scripture clearly insists that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18).

We also can recall from last time that the concept of the wrath of God is not limited to the Old Testament. This is not the case of a “bad God/good God” dynamic in Scripture. Yahweh is not mean-spirited and Jesus is not naïve. The Trinity is unified, and it is simply not the case that one person of the Trinity is hateful and the other loving. The New Testament writers affirmed this truth. For example, an indignant John the Baptist “saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, [and] he said to them, ‘you offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” (Matthew 3:7), and Jesus, Himself, said, “the one who believes in the Son has eternal life; but the one who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

The early Church understood the reality of the wrath of God. As the writer of Hebrews plainly stated it, “²⁶if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:26-27). And Paul later warned this same church in Rome, “because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:5).

A proper appreciation of the wrath of God is necessary for a clear understanding of the gospel. Since the wrath of God is poured out on sin, the presentation of the gospel begins with an understanding of the comprehensiveness of human sin. Until a person realizes that they are a sinner and under the wrath of God, they cannot sense their own danger. That is why, in presenting his understanding of the gospel to the church in Rome, Paul began with a clear proclamation of God’s wrath as being directed upon the “ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). Only then did he proceed to offer the solution to the problem of human sin, namely God’s grace. Paul knew that God’s mercy could only be appreciated as people fully comprehended their need for it. God’s grace is seen most clearly through the lens of our own rebellion and guilt.

And Scripture teaches that God’s grace can cover every sin except the sin of unbelief (Luke 12:10). If a person rejects God, they cannot be saved. A willful denial of the truth as presented in Scripture places an

individual under condemnation and justifies God's wrath upon them. So, as Paul finished his explanation of the gospel that formed the foundation for his letter to the church in Rome, he then described the reasons why people do not believe the truths of Scripture, and then the consequences of their unbelief.

God Has Made Himself Clear

The reason God is perfectly just in punishing sinful humanity is because all people should know better. Today, of course, we have the written revelation of the Scriptures. Yet, some might argue that this is unfair since not all people have the Scriptures available to them. But that is no excuse. As Paul explained, even in the ancient world people were without justification because, ¹⁹“that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (v. 19-20).

All humankind, throughout all history, has been presented with the truth that there is a God. Adam walked with God. Cain was confronted by God. Those at the Tower of Babel and in Sodom and Gomorrah witnessed firsthand the power of God. The Pharaohs of Egypt who encountered Abraham, Isaac, and Moses beheld God's activity. The kings of Israel and their pagan counterparts saw God work. Thus, even before the incarnation of Christ, God had revealed Himself to humanity. When Jesus walked the earth, all who encountered Him were able to see God in the flesh. And since the formation of the early Church, people have had access to the truths of God as revealed in Scripture. Thus, throughout all of human history, as Paul writes, “God is evident” (v. 19).

We must understand that there is a process involved here. No one can know God unless God chooses to reveal Himself. Therefore, it was imperative that God initiate the encounter by doing so. And this He has done to all of humanity. No one can claim ignorance of God. No one can argue that God's wrath is unjust because he or she has never been given the opportunity to know God. Yet, it might be argued that not everyone has had access to these revelations. That is, one might complain that some people were not present during the times God made Himself known, or do not have access to the Scriptures.

But God has revealed Himself in ways beyond the physical. What God has made evident is “His invisible attributes” (v. 20). That is, what God has revealed about Himself is not His physical presence, but Who He is. For example, all people who have ever lived possess an innate sense of God. As C. S. Lewis expressed this idea in his profound book, *Mere Christianity*, all people have an innate sense of right and wrong. That is what Lewis called the Law of Human Nature. And this Law is not our own persuasion about something, nor is it a cultural convention. It is something beyond that. It is a sense of a higher authority that all people possess and that all people, in some way, realize they fall short of.

Paul encountered an example of this when he visited Athens.

²²So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in all respects. ²³For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, “To An Unknown God.” Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything that is in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made by hands; ²⁵nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people

life and breath and all things; ²⁶and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷that they would seek God, if perhaps they might feel around for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸for in Him we live and move and exist”
(Acts 17:22-28).

The ancient world was a polytheistic culture, so in hopes of covering all their bases, the inhabitants of Athens had built an altar to an unnamed God, lest this particular higher power feel left out of their rituals and rites of sacrifice and become offended. So, even these pagans understood that there was a higher power that was beyond what they knew. Paul tried to help them see that this “unknown God” had actually made Himself known through revelation.

That which God has revealed about Himself can be observed through our natural senses. These, specifically, are “His eternal power and divine nature” (v. 20). His omnipotence is most clearly revealed in creation itself. Despite what modern science teaches, arguments in favor of a naturalistic evolution of all matter from cosmic gas are both unproveable and inconsistent. The gaps and fallacies of the arguments for evolution are too many to go into detail here, but suffice it to say that a person who espouses evolution must take it on at least as much faith as Christians do in arguing for a literal seven-day creation.

God’s divine nature can also be seen in the common grace that He extends to all humanity. God restrains human sin, and keeps humanity from being as bad as it could be. It is frightening to imagine a world in which each of us was left to the influence of our own particular conscience to control our actions. God also sustains the environment and provides for the continuation of the natural world. As Jesus said, God “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). Another example of God’s common grace is the establishment of human governments. ¹“For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. . . . ⁴for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a servant of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil” (Romans 13:1, 4).

This revelation of God is called “common grace” because it has not been made exclusively either to the chosen people of Israel, or to believers today. Rather, this element of divine revelation can be “understood by what has been made” (v. 20). As we have mentioned, creation, itself, speaks of a Creator. As David wrote,

“The heavens tell of the glory of God;
And their expanse declares the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1).

David also saw God in the extraordinary development of a human embryo,

¹³“For You created my innermost parts;
You wove me in my mother’s womb.
¹⁴I will give thanks to You, because I am awesomely and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well” (Psalm 139:13-14).

There are many examples from our natural world that demonstrate the majesty of God and the magnificent detail of His creation. Therefore, all of humanity “are without excuse” (v. 20). No one who has ever lived can argue that they had no idea that there was a God.

But we might wonder what, exactly, we can know about God from this “common grace” revelation. For one thing, we can know that God is intelligent. The intricacies of the universe require an intelligent source. We can also see that God is powerful. Only a great being could create a vast universe. The innate moral law we spoke of earlier compels us to acknowledge that God is just. While common grace revelation does not tell us everything about God, it does tell us enough to show us the gulf between Him and us; that there is something greater, and that this something has a morality. This just, omnipotent, intelligent being we call God.

Humanity Has Made a Choice

Therefore, God is justified in His wrath against sinful humanity because, even though they have had the opportunity to know God, they have willfully rejected Him. “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks” (v. 21). There is no plainer way to state the matter. Sinful man has rejected God by choice. With all the evidence before him, man has chosen to ignore it and turn his back on God.

One way man has chosen to reject God is by refusing to “honor Him as God” (v. 21). This word, *doxazō*, is perhaps better translated as glory. That is, sinful man has refused to give God the glory due Him. From beginning to end, Scripture is constant in its reminder to give God the glory He deserves. For example,

“¹Ascribe to the Lord, sons of the mighty,
Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

²Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name” (Psalm 29:1-2).

“²⁴Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.

²⁵For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
He also is to be feared above all gods.

²⁶For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the Lord made the heavens.

²⁷Splendor and majesty are before Him,
Strength and joy are in His place.

²⁸Ascribe to the Lord, you families of the peoples,
Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

²⁹Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name” (1 Chronicles 16:24-29).

“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all things for the glory of God”
(1 Corinthians 10:31).

“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created” (Revelation 4:11).

And to take an example from Church history, English Protestant theologians of the Reformation produced the great Westminster Catechism (1648) which begins,

“Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of man?

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.”

Yet that is precisely what unbelievers do not do. Millions upon millions willfully choose to not acknowledge God as their Creator and give Him the glory He deserves. The motive behind such a willful act is, of course, human pride. As a result, they are guilty and without excuse as they stand under God's righteous judgment. They deserve, and will receive, His wrath if they do not repent.

A second way in which sinful man has rejected God is to not “give thanks” for what He has provided (v. 21). Man has nothing that has not been provided for him. Man does not possess the power to create. Man simply assembles or refashions things already in existence. The old saying that “if you want to make a pie from scratch, the first thing you need to do is create a universe” is true. If we think about it, even our mental creations come from a mind given to us by God.

Yet man, full of sinful pride and arrogance, presumes to believe that he has created things and, as a result, that he possesses them outright and can dispose of them as he chooses. However, our time, our intellectual abilities, our skills, our achievements are all given to us. We have no power to create them ourselves. We cannot even control the bodies we live in. We are both the most complex of God's creation and the most dependent. A newborn calf can stand up, walk, seek shelter, and feed itself immediately. A newborn baby can do none of those things. Yet, sinful man refuses to give thanks to God for these things. By not being thankful and not acknowledging what God has given us, we deny God the glory He deserves.

Humanity Thinks Its Knows Better

Since humanity refuses to give God the glory He is due, it must come up with some alternative explanation. If one does not accept the truths that are clearly stated in Scripture, then one must fashion their own truth. Sensible people recognize that the universe, and all that is in it must have come from somewhere, so they are required to explain its beginnings and how it has come to be as we now find it. But such mental exertions can never adequately explain things, in part because the very intellect we use to discover such answers is, in itself, flawed.

The mental gymnastics humanity has used throughout the centuries to try to explain the supernatural or the divine are all insufficient and have only led to increasing the distance between modern reasoning and the truth. As Paul wrote, explaining the pointless endeavors of such philosophers, “²¹they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (v. 21-22). Their search for wisdom through human speculation had proved worthless. It is absurd to think that natural man can have an understanding of the supernatural. Human perception is inadequate even to understand the natural world around us at times. Therefore, it is irrational to think that natural man could understand the spiritual world.

Worse than this, however, is the fact that such attempts to arrive at the truth outside of Scripture only made those who pursued such endeavors more calloused spiritually. We have all heard that “nature

abhors a vacuum,” and we know that if the heart and mind are not filled with godly things they will be filled with something else. Through the centuries, as humankind has continued to ignore the truths of Scripture and devote its learning and study to finding increasingly corrupt alternatives to the truth, the fallen world has become only more sinful. The history of humankind is not evolutionary, but devolutionary. What began as perfection in Eden has declined to what it is today.

It is clear from a quick scan of the morning news that spiritual blindness and moral depravity are related. As humanity has moved farther from God, naturally its morals and values have become less biblical. This ought not to surprise us, for Scripture informs us that such will be the case. “And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Our fallen world will continue to fall, and as believers, we will (or at least should) become less and less comfortable here.

And Scripture has also told us what the ramifications will be for such people, “they became fools” (v. 22). The Lord had said this through David centuries before,

“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’
They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice;
There is no one who does good” (Psalm 53:1).

The refusal to acknowledge God as Who He is and give Him the glory He deserves leads to a worldview that is increasingly hostile to the truth as presented in Scripture. Being fools, people commit “abominable injustice.” Yet, these modern notions can be seductive. To take one very current example, toleration seems a Christian virtue, and it can be, but it can also be misapplied when the world tolerates, indeed endorses, sin in the form of varying lifestyle choices. Man need never speculate on something God has already made clear in Scripture. So, the church must be wary. As Paul would write to another church body struggling with such temptations, “see to it that there is no one who takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception in accordance with human tradition, in accordance with the elementary principles of the world, rather than in accordance with Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

Humanity Has Created its Own God

Having rejected God and thinking that they knew better, humanity then was compelled to come up with a God of its own. In the classical world, without the modern sciences to try to explain things, humanity “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures” (v. 23). In the beginning, Scripture records that man knew only God.

“²⁵Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, she said, ‘God has appointed me another child in place of Abel, because Cain killed him.’ ²⁶To Seth also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then people began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:25-26).

There was no idolatry, in the sense referred to by Paul, in the Garden or even immediately after the Fall. The only God men knew was the Lord. This was true even until the time of the Flood, it seems, since Scripture records no idolatry, though it cannot be ruled out. But sometime after that, the descendants of Noah began to create gods made in images fashioned by their imaginations. As Joshua told his people as

he reviewed their history, “from ancient times your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods” (Joshua 24:2). Thus, by the time Abraham traveled to Canaan, the land was full of idolatry, as it was in Egypt, where Abraham soon traveled. Eventually the people of Israel, themselves, would turn to idolatry. Perhaps the most infamous example of Israelite this wanton sin is from the exodus,

“¹Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled around Aaron and said to him, ‘come, make us a god who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt - we do not know what happened to him.’ ²Aaron said to them, ‘tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ ³So all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴Then he took the gold from their hands, and fashioned it with an engraving tool and made it into a cast metal calf; and they said, ‘this is your god, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt’” (Exodus 32:1-4).

As God was speaking with their leader and giving him His commands for a covenant between Himself and His people, those very same people were creating a god of their own out of their jewelry. The Lord was longsuffering for many years, and sent many prophets to warn His people of the consequences of their sin, but eventually because of their rejection of Him and because they turned to other gods, the Lord had the nation of Israel destroyed and taken into captivity, first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians.

By Paul’s day, much of the true belief in these gods had disappeared, yet the worship of them, either out of loyalty to the state, fear of being wrong, or simply generations of habit, had not. In fact, many intellectuals of the day, pagan though they were, mocked the idea of gods made by human hands.

“I was once a fig-tree’s trunk, a lump of useless wood,
Till the carpenter, uncertain whether to carve Priapus [a god]
Or a stool, decided on the god. So I’m a god” Horace, *The Satires*, Book 1 satire 8.

But despite the wit of philosophers and poets, many in Paul’s day still worshiped these handmade gods, whether they truly believed in them or not. And in doing so, they “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures” (v. 23).

Birds were often objects of worship, and the study of their flight (augury) was a matter of great importance for those priests who were the guardians of prophecy in ancient and classical cultures. History records that the eagle was particularly worshiped in Rome and both the hawk and stork in Egypt. The selection of four-footed animals who were worshipped as gods in the ancient and classical worlds are almost too numerous to count. For example, among others the Egyptians worshipped the:

Jackal - Anubis	Cow - Hathor
Cat - Bastet	Wolf - Ophis
Falcon - Horus	Hippopotamus - Opet
Crocodile - Sobek	

The bull was the most prominent animal god worshipped among the people of Canaan at the time of the patriarchs. And such idolatry continues even in our modern times. In Thailand and India, the white elephant holds a sacred place. In China and Nepal it is the tiger. Among the Turkish people, the horse has a sacred significance. And even “crawling creatures” (v. 23) were worshipped. In Egypt images of the scarab beetle can be found on many religious artifacts. Among the Canaanite people, the god of Ekron, Baal-zebub (2 Kings 1:2), was associated with the humble, though ubiquitous, fly.

Every form of idolatry is a kind of self-worship, since man is choosing to create the god he wants in the image he prefers. But today, man has made himself the god, “an image in the form of corruptible mankind” (v. 23). Man, himself, determines the exemplars of right and wrong. As one wit (the quotations has been attributed to both Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau) has remarked, “if God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favor.”

So we see in human history a progressively degenerate idolatry. In the ancient and classical worlds, man made his god a beast or a bird. As we reach the modern era of human history, man has dispensed with any need for a god other than himself.

Takeaways

Since Creation, God has revealed Himself to those He created. He has shown man His power and His intelligence, and He has embedded His moral code within us. Yet, from almost the very beginning, man has chosen to go another direction and reject His Creator. Instead, man, in his arrogant belief that he knows better than the One Who created him, has determined to write its own moral code and then create a god that will justify it. The only god capable of justifying man’s moral code is, of course, man himself.

Such a course brings upon sinful man, quite justly, the wrath of God. As believers, we must, first of all, make certain we are not seduced by the worldly philosophies and manmade gods around us. And second, we must be diligent in trying to reach those still lost and direct them through the gospel to the One true God.