



Ignorance is No Excuse

Romans 1:18-20

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This morning we will be looking at Romans, chapter 1, specifically verses 18-20. We are heading into the first main section of Paul's letter, of Paul's argument with respect to salvation. So please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans 1, beginning at verse 18.

"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."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we pray you would open up your Word to us, that in it we might see the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, we pray that you would grip our hearts. Grip us with a love for the Savior. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Why do so many people not believe in God? Why do so many not believe in the Bible? Why do so many not believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior? Is it God's fault? Is it that if God gave just a bit more or better evidence people would then believe in him? Is he to blame for others' unbelief? This morning we're going to be looking at this question.

Paul answers it for us definitively. He says there is indeed a reason many do not believe, but it is not God's fault. It is not for lack of a revelation of God. It is not an intellectual problem. It is not that people can't understand God. It is, at root, a moral problem. It is that people know God exists and they reject him and refuse to believe in him.

This morning as we look at these verses, we will see three things. First, we will see that *God has indeed revealed himself*. Secondly, we will see that *people reject the revealed God*. Then thirdly, we will see that there is *not an excuse, but there is an answer*. God has revealed himself, people reject the revealed God, and there is no excuse, but there *is* an answer.

As we come to this text this morning, we are, as I said, coming to the main section, the opening section of Paul's letter to the Romans. Previously, Paul has been addressing the church at Rome, telling them of his credentials, of his mission, of his hope. Then he has given an overview, an outline, as it were, of the gospel. Up until this point he has been emphasizing the gospel in broad strokes.

He has told us the gospel is the power of God, and by that Paul means the gospel is effectual and effective because of God and his power. Because it comes from the power of God, the gospel cannot be stopped. There is no enemy that can thwart the gospel, that can tell the gospel, "Get away from here. Stop. You have no place here."

The second thing we saw, broadly speaking, was that the gospel is for everyone. It is clear that there is no other way of salvation. God has declared there is no other way to come to him except by faith in the risen Savior, Jesus Christ. By trusting Jesus to make atonement for your sins...that is the only way anyone comes to God.

The good news of the gospel is that no one is beyond the power of the gospel. No matter how bad you think your life is, no matter how wicked you think the things you have done are, no matter how you have wasted time, you are not beyond the power of the gospel. Perhaps just one wonderful illustration of this is the famous hymn writer John Newton. You may know him as the writer of "Amazing Grace."

History also knows him as the man for whom his mother prayed for decades, because Newton was not only a slaver; he was the worst of the slavers. He was a slaver other slavers did not want to be around. Yet God grabbed his heart in the midst of a storm and changed him forever and made him not only a follower of Jesus but a minister of the gospel and a writer of hymns that have been an encouragement to the saints throughout the ages.

No one is beyond the power of God, but the gospel can only be received by faith. It cannot be purchased by works. It is for everyone, but it is the power of God, and it doesn't depend on me and what I do, so all I can do is receive the gospel. This is the most important thing in your life. It's not whether you feel good today or not. It's not whether your felt needs are met or not.

I don't use that in an emotionalistic way. I mean it's not whether you think you really need more friends or greater stability or better financial stability. Those are not ultimate. It's not whether you have a meaningful experience. I'm not here to tell you this morning of my meaningful experience, and you can share in it and have your own. No. The most important thing in life is whether we are right with God.

Now Paul is about to show us our need for the gospel. He started by outlining the solution, and he will go into more depth in later chapters, but now he moves to the problem. Paul is building a chain here. He says God has revealed himself, people reject God, and God's judgment comes down on those who reject him. That's the chain Paul is building in the text before us this morning.

God Has Revealed Himself

The first thing we want to see is that God has revealed himself. Now what does this mean? To *reveal* means to make something known. There are different types of knowledge. There is the most basic type of knowledge: we know something exists. Then there is a second type of knowledge, a higher type of knowledge: we know

about something. We know facts about something. We have details about something. Beyond that, we have personal experience with something.

I think of a wonder of the world that was very close to where I grew up, Niagara Falls. I think probably everyone here in this room is aware of the existence of Niagara Falls. If you weren't, now you are. We all know Niagara Falls exists. Some amongst us, perhaps the more naturally inclined, can tell us exactly how tall the falls are or exactly how many gallons of water go over the falls or how wide it is or where the best vantage points are to see it. That's a higher level of knowledge.

Then there's still an even higher level of knowledge that I don't know many of us have had the privilege to experience, and that is if you go to Niagara Falls you can actually get on a boat called the Maid of the Mist and go ride this boat up to and behind the falls. You can have the falls spray on your face. You can be intimately involved with the falls. These are all different types of knowledge. We need to keep that in mind when we say that God has revealed himself.

How has God revealed himself? Paul is very straightforward in verse 19. "For what can be known about God is plain to them..." Why? "...because God has shown it to them." It's very straightforward. Paul says God can be known and that knowledge is plain. What does Paul mean by *plain*? I think Paul means exactly what you and I think that word means. We use it all the time: "Plain and simple." It is evident. It is clear. It is widely known. Why is it plain? Because God has shown it to them. God is the initiator here. He is the one who has revealed himself.

How has he revealed himself? Is this revelation some secret we have to tap into? Do we need to climb some mountaintop and hope to find enlightenment? Do we need to meditate for hours and hope the secret will be revealed to us? No. Paul actually tells us the exact opposite. He says God has revealed himself in the most public, obvious way. God has, as it were, taken out a billboard and shown us that he exists. He has done this, Paul says, in creation.

Look at verse 20. "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." It's not hidden at all. It's plain. It's clear to see. God is in complete control of his creation. He is the author of his creation, and he reveals himself in it.

In this, Paul is simply borrowing from standard biblical truth. It goes all the way back specifically to the Psalms. Psalm 19 is a parallel passage to what we are seeing here. In Psalm 19, the psalmist writes, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." What the psalmist is writing here is that creation itself yells out, "There is a God! Let me tell you of the Creator." Then "Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge." This is a type of speech.

Think about how good God is. You don't speak English? That's okay. You don't need to know English to see creation. You can't write in Spanish? Don't worry about it. You don't need to write in Spanish in order to see God's creation. God has revealed himself in creation in a universal language. Paul is building on this when he says the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness. *All* are the subject of this revelation, because God has spoken in creation.

There is no one outside of creation. By definition, you are a part of creation. God has revealed himself not just to everyone in creation but also for who he is. So what is God saying in creation? The first thing God is saying is that he exists, because creation presupposes a creator. I am very aware that there are men with many initials...PhD, DD, ED, all of the DDs...after their name who claim all of this just randomly came about by chance, as if somehow I could have someone bring me a big box of matchsticks, and if I throw it up in the air we'll get a replacement piano, because it just happens that way.

Who lives their life like that? Who walks down the street and sees a nice car and says, "You know, I'm just glad that all kind of came together by itself"? No, you look at the car and say, "What an engineering mind designed this. There had to be craftsmen who worked on this. Look at the detail." Who goes into a room and sees an iPhone on a table and says, "I bet this is a random junction of atoms. No one designed *this*"?

I want you to stop for just a moment and think about how much more complex the eye is than the iPhone or the kidney is than a car or the heart or the lungs or the seasons or pollination of plants or the tides or the oceans or the mountains. How could that be random when we know an iPhone isn't random? No, God has shown that he exists in creation itself, but there's more than that. Paul says we can also know *about* God from creation.

Remember our different types of knowledge? We can know God exists, but we can also know *about* God, that higher level of knowledge, from creation. Paul says it this way: "His invisible attributes are perceived from the things that are made." What does that mean? That means you can look at creation and the things that are made and can understand, can perceive God's nature and attributes.

The language Paul uses here is very strong. He says you can intellectually comprehend. You're not guessing at. You can know, you can perceive who God is just from looking at creation. I want you to notice what Paul *doesn't* say. He doesn't say we can know God exhaustively from creation. That's a red herring. That's a false flag. When someone says to you, "You can't know everything about God from creation," you say, "Exactly. That's why we need a Bible. Can I show you one?"

The second thing Paul doesn't say is everything we know about God is perfect. We know about his invisible attributes. We know *about* God, but we don't know perfectly about those attributes. We need God to reveal it to us. What he *does* say is that creation tells us more than just God exists. So who *is* God? Paul begins in

summary form by giving us the two most important things about God that are outlined in creation in verse 20.

He says what we can know is his eternal power and his divine nature. By his *eternal power* we understand creation shows us the power of God making everything in existence, as we look out in our world and see the power that's involved in the wind and the rain and the sea, but that's not enough. We have to go beyond that to our solar system and see the sun and the moon and the planets, but that's not enough.

I don't know if you've seen this. There is a map you can see and find that if our galaxy, the Milky Way, which is but one of many galaxies, was the size of North America, our solar system would be the size of a quarter. That's how big creation is. One galaxy of thousands that we know about, because we can't even see or perceive all of creation. That's mighty power to create that.

We also want to think about the power that's involved in life on our planet alone, the power to bring forth life. The power this shows is from the very beginning, because without it creation would not exist. It is indeed an eternal power. It is before space, before time. That is what is required in creation. God also shows us his divine nature in creation. Creation shows us that God is sovereign, that as the Creator he is Lord over his creation. It is his. He is the one who has created it. He is sovereign over it.

This just makes sense, doesn't it? We don't like to hear this very often because we don't like to hear that we are under someone's authority, but we owe our very existence to God. How could he *not* be sovereign over us? Many of you have heard the famous father joke. "I brought you into this world, and I could take you out." Although that's just for humor, we sense this authority that is inherent in creation, even derived creation of the family.

God is shown in creation to be sovereign. He's also shown to be a God of order. The seasons go in a particular order. Were any of you worried whether the moon would come up this morning instead of the sun? I don't know about you, but I didn't spend a moment thinking as I got out of bed about whether I would float and hit the ceiling or whether gravity would be on today. God is a God of order. Think about all of the things in creation that happen because of order. This shows us who God is.

Creation also shows us that God is good. God gives us rain. He gives us food. He gives us air. He gives us life. Paul puts it this way in Acts 14: "God did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." We might think of the way Paul is describing God here, in our vernacular, as the Supreme Being. That is, his divine nature shows us he exists and his sovereignty shows us he is supreme. This is who God is.

God Has Revealed Himself

So if God has revealed himself in this way, why don't all people acknowledge him? This is a hard question we ask ourselves, and the irony is that we blame God for our failures. If we don't believe in God, therefore he must not exist, as if somehow God's existence depended upon my belief. Or better yet, if we don't believe in God, that's because God hasn't properly revealed himself. It's *his* fault.

Paul has told us God *does* exist. He says God has revealed himself and that revelation is plain. It is for everyone. It is for all creation. Paul also tells us why there is a failure. The failure is obvious for us to see. Not everyone acknowledges and believes in God, but the real question is... *Why is there a failure?* The world puts the failure on God.

That's the whole point of agnosticism. "I don't know enough. I don't have enough information; therefore, I don't know." Paul tells us there is no such thing as agnosticism. There are no agnostics. There is only unbelief. Now there are unbelievers who lie, who *say* they don't know, but Paul says that's not the case, because from creation itself they *do* know. Agnosticism and atheism have a commonality in themselves.

The point is that God has not left himself without a witness. I am not the one who is able to judge the standard of the evidence. God doesn't have to give me the kind of evidence I find credible, because there *is* no such evidence, Paul says, because my heart is set against God in ungodliness and unrighteousness. It's not because *God* has failed; it's because *sinner*s have failed.

God has revealed himself at all times, ever since creation, Paul says, and to all people in a clear way. He emphasizes this. He says it is plain. It is clearly perceived. So why don't people believe? Well, there's a short answer: *sin*. Specifically, people do not want to acknowledge who God is. It's not an intellectual problem; it's a moral problem.

The truth is people don't want to submit themselves to God. They don't want to acknowledge that they're not in control. They don't want to have anyone else in authority over them. The truth is that knowledge of God is before people, but they suppress it. The truth may be plain and it may be shown, but that doesn't mean people will accept it.

Have you ever had that happen to you in a lesser, ordinary way? You might be arguing with someone about when a movie came out or who the last batter to hit 400 was or who has the most touchdowns in an NFL season. You go back and forth and back and forth. You know you're right, and you get out a book or get something off the Internet and show them. You say, "Look. These are the facts; I'm right," and they say, "No, I don't believe it."

We make fun of these people as conspiracy theorists. I watched a video. There are two people in Texas who go to the place where there was the massacre in the church in Texas. Do you remember where the pastor's

daughter was murdered? They claim it's all a government hoax and it never happened. Even though there were funerals and even though there were bodies and even though there's film, they say it's all an elaborate hoax.

There are other people who say we've never been to the moon; it was all done in Hollywood, and you can't convince them otherwise. At some point you say, "The problem is not with the moon. The problem is not with the facts. The problem is with *you*. I can't make you believe the truth." That's what Paul is saying here. You see, what people do is they don't want to know and acknowledge God, so they put up their own barriers. They suppress the truth.

It happens like this. Have you ever been in a car where the engine started making knocking and pinging noises and thought to yourself, "Oh no. I can't afford a new transmission. I can't afford to have work done on this engine, to have this engine rebuilt. What can I possibly do?" Then it strikes you. "I could turn on the radio, and then I won't hear the knocking and the pinging." And you do. What happens when you don't treat the knocking and the pinging? It gets worse because you're not fixing it.

What's the solution to *that*? "I'll just turn the radio up louder." We would look at someone in a car and say, "You're a fool," but people do that every day of the week. They don't want to believe in God, so they drown him out with drugs. They drown him out with hobbies. They drown him out with sports. They drown him out with work. They drown him out with fashion. They drown him out with anything they can, because they don't want to hear creation screaming, "There is a God."

They don't want to listen to the moon. They don't want to listen to the sun. They don't want to hear the trees. They don't want to hear the grass. They blot it out. They do it intentionally and purposefully. So what happens then? What is the result of this rejection, of this suppression of the truth? You may have noticed if we look at our text that we're working our way backward. We saw first that God had revealed himself clearly in verse 20, and then we saw that people suppressed that truth in verse 19.

Now we go to verse 18 and see the result of that suppression is that they come under the just judgment of God. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Why? Because by their unrighteousness they suppress the truth. Why? Because God has revealed himself. It's all one piece. The wrath of God is revealed against sin. We should not be surprised by this, because God is the Sovereign Creator. He is the one who is holy and just and good, and he has revealed himself to everyone, yet sinners still reject him.

How they reject him is in ungodliness and unrighteousness. *Ungodliness* is sinfulness in our religion. What do I mean by that? Ungodliness is rejecting God, throwing off the idea of God because we want to be God. We want to be in control, and we want to be without accountability. Ungodliness shows itself in idolatry. We worship other things.

This is true throughout all human history. People worship their ancestors instead of God. Paul will tell us later people worship animals instead of God. People will worship trees instead of God. People will worship fictional beings instead of God. They'll worship themselves, anything so they don't have to worship God. But it doesn't end there, because there's not only ungodliness; there's unrighteousness.

Unrighteousness is sinfulness that is moral. This is immorality. This is behavior. After having thrown off God, thrown off his Word, thrown off his law, we can act however we want. It's no surprise that immorality follows impiety. I hope *you're* not surprised by it, because that's the world we live in. Have you ever wondered why there's so much lying, so much theft, so much abuse in the world today? It's because the world has thrown off God. It wants to do what is right in its own eyes.

Because God is God, the sinner's suppression of his truth doesn't make it any less real. In fact, it actually makes the sin greater. So God reveals his wrath against such rebellion. Now what do we mean when we say "God's wrath"? I think there's a difficulty here. When we hear the Bible speak of God's wrath we relate it to *human* wrath, and when we think of human wrath we think of something like *this*.

We think of young children in the home doing something they shouldn't over and over and over again and Mom or Dad being very patient, and then eventually the last straw comes and they blow up. "That's it! You're grounded for the rest of your life. Go to your room. You can't ever eat again. I don't ever want to see you again." We rightly understand that is an emotional explosion that doesn't have a great basis in reality. It's going to blow over.

We sometimes think of God's wrath that way, because that's our definition of *wrath*, that God just all of a sudden says, "I've had it with all you people. That's it! I'm done." But that's not the way *wrath* is used in the Bible. The word for *wrath* in the Bible actually means to grow ripe or to build up. It is not the idea of an explosion out of nowhere. It is more like water building up slowly behind a dam.

God is restraining his judgment all this time. He is not being overly emotional about it. He will not explode. His wrath is building up because of the contradiction to his holiness. It is not a quick passion in God. It is rather his settled opposition to evil. This wrath is revealed even in our day. How is it revealed? I think the easiest way to see it is the wrath of God is revealed in the inherent tendency of evil to produce misery.

Who would have been happy or wanted to vacation in Poland in 1943? Who would have wanted to live under Pol Pot? Would any of us have wanted to live under Mao in the great Cultural Revolution when millions were killed? Would any of us want to live in a place where there's no law, where people come and steal things from you all the time, break down your doors, hurt you? No, we know inherently that evil produces misery. If you don't believe me, go home today and watch the news. You'll have plenty of examples. We see it all around us.

God has revealed himself, and that revelation has been rejected by people, and God's just judgment comes upon them. So what do we do then? This isn't exactly good news. But we can't understand the good news of the gospel until we understand the bad news of our sin. No one comes to Jesus until they know they need Jesus. No one pleads for redemption unless they realize they need to be redeemed. That's what Paul is laying out here.

Not An Excuse But An Answer

Paul has painted a bleak picture, but the good news is that Paul brings us a God who is good and who does not stop his revelation at creation. Now God would be just in doing that. He could have just revealed himself in creation enough to condemn us, to hold us responsible without excuse and condemned under his wrath, but God has not only revealed himself; he has revealed the solution to our problem.

God knows we rebel against him. He knows we suppress his truth. He knows we refuse to see his revelation, and as a result, God gives to us his Word. Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 1: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom [through revelation and creation], it pleased God through the folly of what we preach [the Word of God] to save those who believe."

In his Word, God reminds us of our foolishness and tells us of his provision for our ungodliness and our unrighteousness. The wrath of God may indeed be revealed. We see that in verse 18, but look up one verse. The righteousness of God is *also* revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul puts it this way to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3: "The sacred writings are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

John puts it this way at the end of his gospel: "These [the Scriptures] were written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." You see, God is not stingy with his revelation. He reveals himself in creation, and when that is not enough he reveals himself again even more in his Word.

He accomplishes this, because the answer is found not just in knowing God but in his Son who was sent on our behalf. This revelation is like none other. It shows us exactly who God is. It is the way of salvation. God's Word tells us God spared no effort to redeem rebels. What a remarkable thought that is. Those who have rejected God, rejected his truth, suppressed his truth to continue in their rebellion, yet God still shows his love to us in that while we were *still* sinners Christ died for us.

This is the love of God for us to see, manifested plainly. First John 4 says, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us..." Same word: revealed plainly. "...that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." Here is God again revealing himself plainly, clearly, so that we might know and follow the Lord Jesus.

Paul will tell us more later in this book about ourselves, but right now, will you stop and think about your own rebellion? Will you consider how you are suppressing God's truth to get your own way? Will you see the foolishness of that and acknowledge that God has reached down in the person of his Son? You see, you don't have any excuse, but God has given you an answer. Embrace him. Embrace the answer to your guilt and shame. Embrace the Lord Jesus Christ.