

When the famous atheist... Robert G. Ingersol... was (one day) delivering an inflammatory lecture against Christ and the Bible... he dramatically took out his watch and said... "*I'll give God a chance to prove Himself... that He exists and is God Almighty. I challenge Him to strike me dead within 5 minutes!*..." First there was silence. Many became uneasy. ... At the end of the allotted time... Ingersol then exclaimed (derisively)... "*See! There is no God!*"

After the lecture a young man said to a Christian lady that he had invited to hear the atheist speak... "*Well... Ingersol certainly proved something tonight!*" ... "*Yes... he did!*"... she replied. "*He demonstrated that even the most defiant sinner cannot exhaust the patience of the Lord Almighty...*"

A third friend walked up to the couple and added:

*"You know... I had the most interesting thing happen to me as I came to the auditorium this evening. A drunkard... acting very belligerent darted from the alley way... daring me to hit him. Do you suppose I actually struck him... just because he challenged me to do so...? No! I didn't."*

In the same way... our Lord will not strike every petulant little human being who defiantly challenges Him.

Today... we will be looking at the heart of an atheist... through the lens of Romans 1:18-20... which concludes by saying that no one has an excuse for not believing in God. ... Then after examining our passage for today... we will briefly evaluate three very common excuses that people often try to use... for not believing in God... #1. "What about the poor innocent native in Africa who has never heard of Christ?" ... #2. "Isn't the Bible full of contradictions?" ... and #3. "If God is good... why do bad things happen to me?"

So... let's get started with our passage. It is just three short verses. I'll read them together.

### **Romans 1:18-20**

According to these verses... atheism has nothing at all to do with man's supposed ignorance – of whether or not there is a God. Atheism is all about a person's dislike of Him. Romans 1:18-20 clearly teaches that some people do not know God – BECAUSE THEY DO NOT WANT TO KNOW HIM !

God's Word declares (Folks!) that unbelief is never an intellectual problem. ... Do you remember last week... when we were covering Romans 1:16... which says... "For I am not ashamed of the gospel"...? I said:

*"If we are honest... most of us would have to admit to being ashamed of the gospel sometimes. We fear two things in particular. ... One is the fear of intellectual shame. This is the fear that the gospel does not measure up intellectually..."*

Well shame on us... for feeling ashamed. The gospel more than measures up. (You see...) the atheist's problem is not an intellectual problem – it is instead generated by moral and psychological causes.

The issue is not a lack of credible evidence to convince a rational human being that there is a God... but that which is known about God is repugnant. .... Let's take each verse one at a time... here.

### **Romans 1:18**

Verse 18 comes to the reader as quite a surprise. ... Paul (in the verses just before – which we studied last week) had just been discussing the gospel... as God's saving power... revealing the wonderful news that God's

righteousness is available to all who believe. ... We might have expected Paul to write further and give greater detail about these wonderful truths. Instead... we get THIS dire news... about God's **wrath** against sin.

No one likes to talk about the wrath of God... particularly if it is thought of in relation to ourselves. ... But if we have to think about it... as our study of Romans 1:18-20 obviously **forces** us to do... we find ourselves reacting generally in one of two ways. ... Either (1) we argue that wrath is somehow unworthy of God... (a blotch on his character... and therefore a mistaken notion that should be abandoned at once by all right-thinking people) or (2) we reply by denying that we merit God's wrath... that we do not deserve it.

The second reaction is the more serious of the two. So it is the one Paul tackles in the development of his argument for the need we all have of the Christian gospel.

The very mention of the wrath of God... will draw energetic responses from an un-believer and the believer (alike)! ... For many Christians... the concept of God's wrath is an embarrassing doctrine... that they see only fuels the atheist's contentions. "*How can a loving God send anyone to Hell?*" ... Sadly... many believers... in order to avoid their discomfort... have come to view the wrath of God as an entirely wrong doctrine... which every "*enlightened*" Christian should have abandoned long ago.

But the Biblical writers did not share this reluctance. ... God had inspired them to write about it so often... that it may very well surprise you (what I am about to say.) There are actually more references in Scripture to the anger... fury... and wrath of God... than there are to His love and

tenderness. (Use a Bible concordance... and you will see that this is true.) J.I. Packer writes: "*One of the most striking things about the Bible is the vigor with which both Testaments emphasize the reality and terror of God's wrath.*"

Why? ... Why is this true...? ... Because the wrath of God provides the necessary dark background against which the glory of the gospel shines brightly. ... (Stop and think!) ... God's loving offer of forgiveness means nothing... unless we can see it contrasted with a right understanding of how bad our condition is. ... A person will have no desire to seek God's salvation... if they have no idea that they need it.

And now consider it from the standpoint of one... who is a believer. A person who considers themselves to be a Christian... but who has little to no idea what they were saved from (how bad it really was – before God supposedly saved them)... has a hard time serving God. They won't. Why should they? ... "*You know... God is pretty lucky to have me... And I might eventually get around to doing some nice things for Him... when it is more convenient for me to do so...*" Or they give service to God begrudgingly. "*Well... I guess I should...*" ... But on the other-hand – a Christian who has a better grasp of what they have been saved from... will serve from a grateful spirit... and with more enthusiasm and love.

I think that it is an excellent strategy for Satan to make the wrath of God so abhorrent to non-believers... and embarrassing to believers. But Romans is going to make us consider it all the way to chapter 3... verse 20. So we are going to staring at it right in the face. ... Therefore it would be good for us to gain an initial comprehension of what it is... and what it isn't.

Otherwise the next several weeks of covering the verses ahead will be greatly misunderstood.

With that in mind... first of all... God's wrath does NOT mean that God has certain fits of uncontrolled rage. God's wrath and human anger are not the same. Human anger (unlike God's wrath) is usually distorted. It is thoroughly enmeshed in selfishness. ... It is always contaminated by human sin.

There are two basic words in the Greek language used to express anger. From *thumos* we get our words *thermometer* and *thermos*. This is red-hot anger—the kind that overcomes people when they lose control and smack someone on the nose. It is impulsive and passionate. ... That is not the word used in our text. The word here is *orge*... which signifies a settled and abiding condition. It can build... like water about to spill over a dam... but unlike human anger... it is controlled. Now... the day is coming (Folks!) when it is going to spill over. But it will be all in God's perfect way.

"The wrath of God" does not portray a Deity who "flies off the handle" and indiscriminately thumps anybody who happens to be at hand. God's wrath is perfect as to its timing... its quality... and in its expression to its objects.

Now... what I am about to say... is something that completely INCOMPREHENSIBLE to an atheist. I am about to draw a conclusion from our text... and I want you to see how well you do with it. (Here it is...)

GOD PERFECTLY HATES – JUST AS HE PERFECTLY LOVES.

We often only want to dwell on the perfection of God's love... but His hate is every bit as perfect as His love.

You may wonder... "*Is it possible for God to love and hate – at the same time...?*" The answer is: "*Of course!*" That is why Paul wrote verses 16... 17... and 18... all together... as he did. (Here... look at this context...)

### Romans 1:16-18

There is a particular connectedness between verse 17 and 18... that I want you to notice. Please find (in verse 17)... the phrase that says: "the righteousness of God is revealed..." (Do you see it...?)

Now look at the very next verse (verse 18.) Do you see almost the exact same wording...? Except one word is changed out in verse 18. "The wrath of God is revealed." ... The "wrath of God" is the counter-part to the "righteousness of God." ... But both are in play! The Lord perfectly expresses them both. And both are worthy characteristics for God.

Verse 18 is written in the present tense. "God's wrath is being revealed from Heaven." It is being revealed right now – as I speak. (No... this sermon is not meant to be God's torture for you. That is not what I mean.) Today... concurrent to my speaking... God is revealing His wrath all over the world. ... In other words... God is not some impersonal cosmic force... Who set the universe in motion to run its course.

One way that I would suggest to you that He does this... is in the eventual misery that moral evil produces. ... You know... sin is only fun for the moment. The temporary enjoyment that sin brings never lasts. ... In fact... because of the law of diminishing returns... the enjoyment grows less and

less – each time the sin is committed. And given enough time... misery eventually sets in. ... Those of you who have strayed away from the faith will know exactly what I am talking about. After a while... the thrill you were chasing after diminishes. It starts to become very elusive... and vainly chased after (hoping it will be there again.) But soon it evaporates and sourness is left. Not only does the enjoyment disappear... misery replaces it.

A second way that the wrath of God is being revealed from Heaven... is through a nagging voice of conscious. A third is disease and illness. And a fourth is death. God's wrath is being revealed from Heaven. But one day it will spill over.

I love the story that has been attributed to Donald Grey Barnhouse... a famous preacher... and Professor at Biola College. The story is about an old farmer... who was not only an atheist... he was very antagonistic to the gospel. It seemed that this farmer owned property directly beside an old country church... and every Sunday... he particularly enjoyed revving his tractor at it's peak noise level... back and forth... and as close to the church as possible... while the church met for worship.

Spring came... and his corn sprouted. It was more than knee high by the fourth of July... and in the Fall... the farmer had the largest crop he had ever produced.

Taking great satisfaction in this... he wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. In it... he said that obviously God did not exist... because he had purposefully gone against what the Christians felt were the structures of God – and yet “look how I am blessed!” he boasted.

The following week was the pastor's turn. He too wrote a letter to the editor. But his rebuttal only needed one line. He simply wrote: "God doesn't settle all His accounts in October."

Listen to how the Prophet Nahum ominously put it:

**Nahum 1:3 (ESV)**

*The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.*

What specifically is the focus of God's wrath...? Verse 18 gives us the answer to that question. It is all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. The first word... "ungodliness" (*asebeia*) means a refusal to recognize... worship... and serve our Creator. ... The second word "unrighteousness" (*adikia*) is a consequence of the former. Because Gentiles refuse to worship and serve God their sexual and social behaviour is 'wicked'. "Ungodliness" deals with how man treats God. "Unrighteousness" is a matter of how man treats fellow man.

"Ungodliness" is the determination to live as though God doesn't exist. It is a deliberate decision to live for self... and to intentionally stifle any truth which challenges their self-centeredness.

All people... regardless of their opportunities to know the Bible and to hear a clear Gospel message about Jesus Christ... have God-given evidence of His existence. ... But they are universally inclined to resist and assault that evidence... so they can go on living selfishly for themselves.

And their suppression of the truth is not passive. (Author and Pastor) Kent Hughes writes:

*This suppression of the truth is not passive. It carries the idea of holding something down. This is much like the little boy who smuggled his dog into his room to spend the night. When he heard his parents coming, he put the dog in his toybox and sat on the lid, then tried to talk to his parents while ignoring the repeated thump of his poor pet. The idea of suppression here is, continual and aggressive striving against the truth. Paul opens our eyes to the fact that all who are without Christ are in the constant process of holding down the truth and therefore are subject to God's abiding anger. There are no exceptions!*

What do unbelievers suppress? Verses 19 and 20 tell us. ... What mankind holds down is the basic knowledge of the majestic transcending power of God as Creator and Sustainer.

### **Romans 1:19**

There is unmistakable testimony about God available to all mankind. God has never left any human being completely to their own initiative. He has always revealed Himself... and He continues to reveal Himself to man.

**NO PERSON CAN RIGHTLY CLAIM IGNORANCE OF GOD. PEOPLE HAVE NO EXCUSE FOR BEING ATHEISTS.**

"Many missionaries point out that the heathen know more than we think," says (Pastor and Author) Leith Samuel.

*"They know that there is a God. There are no atheists among heathen tribes. There has never been discovered upon earth a tribe of people, however small or depraved, which has not believed in some kind of god or had some system of worship.... The heathen found in so-called primitive tribes know that they have sinned. When a Christian comes to them and talks about sin he often finds ready acknowledgment that this is true."*

Let me use an illustration. Suppose you are driving down the street and come to a sign that says... "Detour—Turn Left." ... But you ignore this and drive on. ... It happens that there is a police officer present... who stops you and begins to write out a ticket. ... What excuse might you have? ... Well... You might argue that you didn't see the sign. ... But that would carry very little weight if the sign was well placed and in bright colors. ... Besides... it makes no difference. ... As long as you are driving the car... the responsibility for seeing the sign and obeying it is yours. ... Furthermore... you are accountable if (having ignored the sign)... you recklessly race on and either harm yourself and your passengers... or destroy property.

Paul's teaching fits this illustration. He is saying (first)... that there is a sign. It is God's revelation of himself in nature. (Second)... you have "vision." You can see His intelligent and orderly creation. ... Therefore... if you choose to ignore the fact that there must be an intelligent designer... the disaster that follows is your own fault.

Paul is not saying that the sign is there but hidden... that we are only able to find it if we look carefully. ... He is saying that the sign is *plain*. ... It is a billboard. ... In fact... it is a world filled with flashing billboards. ... No one... no matter how weak-minded or insignificant... can be excused for missing it.

### **Psalm 19:1-6 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.* <sup>2</sup> *Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.* <sup>3</sup> *There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.* <sup>4</sup> *Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the*

*sun, <sup>5</sup> which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. <sup>6</sup> Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.*

Observing a painting... leads a person to conclude that there must be an artist. In the same way... to observe the tremendous creation... we must conclude that there is a tremendous Creator. ... If one is not at least searching after God... he or she is suppressing the truth.

### **Romans 1:20**

Does anyone have a legitimate excuse for not believing in God...? The Bible here answers an emphatic "NO!" But man (nevertheless) tries so desperately – but in vain – to find an acceptable excuse.

People have a host of questions. They use them only as a way to suppress the truth that they know about God. They suppose that these are valid excuses for their rejection of the deity. (Let's briefly look at three.)

1. *What about the poor innocent native in Africa who has never heard of Christ?* ... Every preacher gets asked this question. ... In fact... it is probably the question most asked by Christians and non-Christians alike. But it is also true that the text we have been studying answers it. ... The implication behind this question is that the "innocent" native is going to be sent to hell for failing to do something he has never had an opportunity to do... (namely)... believe on Jesus Christ as his Savior... and that a God who would be so unjust as to condemn the "innocent" native cannot be God. ... And that is true! ... God must be just... and God would be unjust if

He condemned a person for failing to do what he or she obviously did not have the opportunity of doing.

But that is not the case in regard to the so-called innocent in Africa. To be sure... the native is innocent of failing to believe on Jesus... if he or she has never heard of Jesus. ... But (Now hear me...) It is not for this that the native (or anyone else who has not heard of Jesus) is condemned. ... As Romans 1 tells us... the native is condemned - for failing to do what he or she actually knows he or she should do... that is... seek out... worship... and give thanks to the God revealed in nature.

**Jeremiah 29:13 (ESV)**

*You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.*

A person might argue that the native actually does seek God... offering in proof the widespread phenomenon of religion in the world. ... But that is no excuse either... for the universality of religion... as Paul is going to show in the next verses (that we will study next week) is actually evidence of man's godlessness. Why? Because the religions that man creates are actually attempts to escape having to face the true God. Humans invent religion — not because they are seeking God... but because they are running away from Him.

2. *Isn't the Bible full of contradictions?* ... This is an excuse we also often hear... but it is as unsubstantial as the first one. ... We are told that as the data from science has come in... so many errors have been found in the Bible... that no rational person could possibly believe that it is God's true revelation.

The problem with this argument is its premise. It assumes that the accumulation of historical and scientific facts has uncovered an increasing number of textual and other problems... but actually the opposite is the case. ... As the data has come in over the decades... (particularly over the last few decades)... the tendency is for the Bible to be vindicated. *Time* magazine recognized this in a cover story in the December 30, 1974, issue. The story was captioned "How True Is the Bible?" In this essay the magazine's editors examined the chief radical critics of the recent past—Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, and others—but concluded:

*The Bible's credibility has been enhanced. After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps the better for the siege. Even on the critics' own terms—historical fact—the scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.*

3. "Why does God tolerate evil, particularly in my life? Why do bad things happen to me?

Part of the answer to this problem is... that if we got what we deserved... we would be suffering (not merely) the bad things that we now experience... but rather we should be experiencing all the eternal torments of Hell. ... In other words... instead of saying... "Why do bad things happen to me?"... we should be saying... "Why do good things happen to me?"

Because of our rejecting God... and all of His evidence... the only thing we deserve are bad things. All we deserve is evil. If our life has any good in

it... that good (however minimal) should point us to the God from whom all good comes.

God perfectly loves – and God perfectly hates. God's full wrath is completely justified... because all who have taken the wrong path – chose to!

And Believers! ... You don't have to keep making the wrong choice. Have you been ashamed of the Gospel...? ... Would you be willing to pray that God will give you more opportunities to share it freely with others...? Would you be willing to ask God to give you a clear opportunity this week...?

Have you been suppressing the truth you know about Him – that He wants you to tell others about Him...?