

ROMANS BIBLE STUDY

Romans 1:18-23

Lesson #2

Introduction

Last week we began our study with verses 1-17. In those verses Paul presented his opening greeting, where he identified himself, and affirmed his desire to come to Rome to see the saints in person. He also declared his apostolic mission as that of bringing about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the Lord's name's sake. (v.5) Meaning, for His public recognition and glory. He started at the beginning, with the promise that Abraham received from God that all the Gentile nations would be blessed by one of his future descendants. This promise was recorded in the writings of Moses, and expanded upon by subsequent prophets in the holy scriptures. Paul makes it clear, through both human genealogy and divine pronouncement, that Jesus Christ is that promised descendant. (vv.3-4)

Then he makes some comments on the effects that this knowledge has upon all those who hear it and truly believe it. Many hear it to be sure, and many say they believe it, just as the Jews had heard the commandments of God from Moses after they were brought out of Egypt, but not everybody who hears really believes, as the record of that situation, and the subsequent events so clearly demonstrates. Everywhere, from Old Testament to New, the scriptures affirm that the effect of faith, the effect of believing God, is subsequent obedience to God. And Paul drove this home by his quote from the Old Testament (Hab 2:4) that the righteousness person will *live* by their faith, that is, in accordance to their true beliefs. In other words, if you really believe that God is, and that He has commanded certain things, then you will do those things, at least to the very best of your ability.

Paul makes this clear in the first 17 verses, where he's discussing the true believers. But then in verse 18, he's going to begin to show the contrasting situation. The situation that exists among the unbelieving. He's going to go on with this contrasting view all the way through chapter 3, verse 20. In these verses Paul is going to demonstrate that all unbelieving humankind, whether Jew or Gentile, is sinful and corrupted in the sight of God. And the effects of this unbelief, which the scriptures declare is without excuse, will be examined in some detail. Paul's letter to the Romans is probably the most precisely detailed and logically presented treatise on systematic Christian theology as can be found anywhere.

In the verses we'll be considering in this lesson, Paul lays out the progression of events that characterize the descent of a society, or nation, into moral depravity, and the consequences of that descent. It can be seen and readily identified by distinct and obvious signs. The consequences of the fall of man was the total loss of the spiritual life that Adam and Eve had at their creation. The result of this loss is that mankind no longer has any innate hunger and desire for holiness and righteousness. Therefore, God has to apply, and continually maintain, certain internal and external restraints to prevent mankind from prompt self destruction by his own doings. God doesn't need to cause anything of His own to chasten a society, He can simply reduce, or cease to do what He's already doing, namely restraining innate human depravity.

Internally He provides a conscience, that helps to curb our actions, and externally He provides governments with laws and enforcement personnel for the protection of the weaker members of society. But mankind, if left alone, without a functioning conscience, and free of laws and effective enforcement of those laws, will, and always has in the past, degenerate into a violent and merciless mob. It is only because of God's ongoing mercy, of maintaining these internal and external restraints, that has allowed the human race to last this long. But He has in the past, and still does now, either scale back, or intensify that level of restraint according to the behavior of that nation or society. We all know full well that actions have consequences. And so it is with God.

But, by the mercy of God, even the most godless and violent of societies usually have some small degree of restraint to prevent their total destruction. But one day, at the end of this age, He is going to remove these restraints, and we know what will happen then, but in the meantime, God uses this restraining power to either bless or to curse a nation or society, by either strengthening or reducing His level of internal and external restraints. This is one of the primary means God uses to providentially steer His creation in the direction He has planned from before time began.

As we said before, there is a definite order of progression, and there are causes and inevitable effects of those causes, and all of it can be readily seen and identified, because God wants humanity to plainly see and understand both the benefits of righteousness, and the consequences of evil. I have titled this lesson:

THE ROAD TO PERDITION (Pt.1)

Verses 18-20: (Step 1 - DENIAL)

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. Romans 1:18-20

If you think about it, everything that has happened in history, regardless of the magnitude and duration, started with a single action. What happened in that initial action led to what ever happened next, and so on and so on. There are infinite examples we could use, but just for one, the American Revolution started with a single shot, and no one knows who actually fired it. But the course of history for this country, and even the free world has been affected by that single event. And our lives to this very day are surely affected by the things that directly resulted from that initial action. In that particular situation nobody was able to predict the outcome of events, so the whole thing started over a difference of principles and beliefs. Over the innate desire of humanity to be free men, in direct opposition to an elite group that wished to maintain control over them. There was no play book for freedom, but there was a book that speaks of righteousness and fairness to our fellow man, and treating others as we want them to treat us, and based on the teachings of this book a new nation began to emerge.

But on the other hand, there are many situations where the outcome is predictable. There are many situations where history and experience has demonstrated that certain actions that we take will produce predictable results. In the medical field, doctors can observe initial symptoms and from them diagnose a problem, and accurately predict the next stage of events that will occur. For instance, I don't know how it works for others, but for myself, when I'm coming down with a cold, the first symptom is always a slightly sore throat. Then comes the stuffy nose, and then the fever and achy feeling, and finally the heavy coughing. It takes about two weeks to run its course, and when I see the first symptoms I can predict the whole coming scenario with regrettable accuracy.

Now I've used these examples to make the point that although life isn't always predictable, nevertheless there are many things that we can predict with very reliable accuracy, because we have historically established and documented precedent, and we have our own experiences as well. The simple truth is however, that we can't all learn everything from our own experiences, we don't live long enough for that, so we learn a great deal from what we're told by others, wise individuals who do have firsthand experience and direct knowledge.

Now with this, I can get to the point I want to make. The holy scriptures are a compilation of divinely inspired writings that have been passed on to mankind for our instruction. They are not simply a group of very wise men recording their own thoughts and ideas for posterity, but rather a Holy Spirit directed compilation of divine instruction and revelation. What they say is accurate and true and irreversible. If they give us instructions regarding an issue, we are wise to pay attention, and if they warn us of consequences of certain actions we must not ignore those warnings, lest we suffer those consequences. What Paul is going to describe in these verses, from 18 through 32 are the causes and resultant inescapable effects of certain actions and beliefs on the part of mankind, all mankind, no matter who they are or where they live.

Remember we said that verse 18 begins a contrasting comparison between the believers, who live by their faith, to the unbelievers who live as Paul is going to describe. Paul says that *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness*. Notice that Paul says that the wrath of God is revealed, not on those who don't know the truth, but on those who do, but then suppress it in unrighteousness. According to this verse, God's wrath isn't revealed for ignorance of something, but rather for actually knowing it and then intentionally denying it because it opposes your own unrighteous desires. This is the root cause of everything that follows. This is like that first shot on the old north bridge at Lexington that led to a national revolutionary war. All that follows started right here.

When God gave His 10 Commandments to Moses to take to the people, He began them with His declaration that He is God, and the people were to have no other gods than Him. (Ex 20:1-3) Everything else God says afterwards issues forth from that initial understanding. That is God's "shot heard round the world." Everything else whatsoever rests and builds on this divine declaration. Paul commences his contrast with this distinction, that the wrath of God is made manifest upon those who fail at the primary level, the level of accepting the obvious fact that God exists. But, lest someone protests: But how do we know for sure? Paul has the following words:

because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

We often hear the protest that there's no way to be sure, because God isn't visible to us. But that's no argument at all, because Jesus was visible to us, in bodily form, and almost nobody believed Him, even when He did undeniable miracles. So the problem isn't the invisibility of God, nor the lack of credible evidence, but the words of God. It's what He says that causes men to deny Him, not His invisibility, and not a lack of irrefutable evidences. Paul says that whatever is knowable about God has been made evident to mankind by all the things that He has made. By this alone mankind is seen by God as inexcusably obligated to accept His existence. There can be no credible argument to the contrary. So says God.

When the complexities of the DNA that forms the building blocks of living creatures finally started to be understood, it was said by some that this was the end of Darwinian evolution theory, because the immense complexities of the building blocks of life made random mutation utterly impossible to defend. We know that science has over and over proven that the universe, and all that's in it, especially living creatures, could not possibly have happened without an intelligent designer. No mentally competent adult human being can actually believe that. And all emerging scientific evidence continues to support and reinforce that obvious conclusion.

The entire universe seems to be held in its proper place by a delicate balance of inertia against gravitational attraction. And what exactly is gravity anyway? We've devised ways to measure its affects, but nobody can explain it. And, the very same stem cells that form a heart in a newly conceived baby also form the liver and lungs and all the other parts. And how do these cells know what to make, and where to put all those parts, and how to tie them all together into a functioning being. Its absurd to think it all happens by random chance. There is immensely complex information that's sent to the cells to make them do the things they do, and this complex information is passed on chemically and electrically in direct operation of the DNA coding. To conclude that it's all natural mutations is beyond any rational defense.

Paul says that the whole creation, with all its complexities, is God's visible proof of His existence. It is how He has chosen to make Himself irrefutably evident to all humanity, throughout the ages, even before we had the scientific learning to see, and begin to understand all the enormous complexities involved. Science undeniably reinforces the existence of God.

But what has actually happened? Instead of accepting the obvious, unbelieving mankind simply denies the truth of that evidence, and even argues that it means just the opposite. We constantly hear that science disproves the existence of God. How absurd is that? It's like a stubborn man looking at a white piece of paper and swearing up and down that it's really black. You see, it isn't the evidence that's the problem, it's the absolute refusal to accept the obvious meaning of that evidence. There is none so blind as the one who simply refuses to see. And this is what Paul is saying, that those who deny God aren't doing it out of ignorance, but out of a stubborn refusal to accept the irrefutable truth. And why do they so adamantly resist, because they love their unrighteous, they love their sinful lives, and refuse to give it up, regardless of the preponderance of evidence or the resultant consequences.

This same week that I'm writing this lesson, I've heard two separate comments on secular TV programs that said, (1) "well, there's no tangible evidence that God actually exists." And (2) "I only believe what I see can with my own eyes." Do you see how absolutely insane this is? No tangible evidence, who's he kidding, and only believes what he sees with his own eyes; what, is he totally blind? The heavens declare the glorious and miraculous works of God, and we see that all around us every minute of the day, and then we can say that there's no tangible evidence, and that we can't see anything that demonstrates God's existence.

If you come home and find that your house is ransacked, and all of your valuable belongings are missing, you are quite certain there was a burglar in your home. You didn't have to see him to believe he exists, the evidence speaks for itself.

So again, I say, it's not the lack of evidence, it's the stubborn refusal to accept the irrefutable conclusions of that evidence. By suppressing the truth, Paul doesn't simply mean that they try to keep anybody from hearing about it, although that does go on without a doubt, but the primary point is that they intentionally suppress the obvious meaning of it, they twist it sideways and turn it backwards. They do all kinds of mental gymnastics to try to explain it away in their own minds, so that they don't have to deal with the obvious consequences of it. They deny it and deny it until they themselves are able to believe any hair-brained alternative that's offered, no matter how absurd it might be. (e.g. Natural evolution)

Verse 20 is a formal indictment by God, through the writing of Paul that all those who deny Him are guilty of intentional suppression of known truth, for the express intention of indulging their own unrighteousness, and He says *that they are without excuse*. My dear secular friends, please don't think that you can plead ignorance at the Judgement Throne of God. He has openly and publically declared that His creation of this universe, by itself alone, even absent of any further information or evidence whatsoever, is considered irrefutable proof of His existence, and unbelief in God, in the face of a universe of tangible, and visible evidence is inexcusable, and the consequences is everlasting damnation in that lake of eternal fire. So says the One and only living God, in His holy scriptures.

My dear Christian friends, do not be intimidated by an unbelieving secular society that calls black white, and white black, that looks at scientific evidence and swears up and down that it proves exactly the opposite of what it obviously does. God has given mankind a rational and logical mind, with which we are to draw sensible conclusions from available information. The information is right there before our eyes, we need only observe and use our God-given faculties of reason to conclude that someone made all of this happen. It is a product of an intelligent designer, there is no other conclusion that can reasonably be drawn from the available evidence. Any conclusion to the contrary is not based on the evidence, but on something other than the evidence. And the scriptures clearly tell us what that is, it is mankind's innate desire to practice many things that God has forbidden, so, to soothe our conscience and ease our fears, we concoct alternative conclusions that the evidence clearly refutes. And just like the stubborn man who swears the white paper is really black, unbelieving mankind stubbornly swears that the evidence actually means the opposite of what it obviously does.

This is why I have always said that public debates with secular society are for the most part futile. Many dear Christians think that if we can just present the evidence clear enough, or if we could just perform some miracle, that secular society would accept the truth and come to faith. What many Christians don't understand, or don't want to believe, is that secular society already has the evidence, presented more perfectly than any human being can ever present it, (v.19) but they intentionally suppress the obvious conclusions because they want to. They don't need more or better evidence, they need a new heart that will rightly respond to the clear and perfect evidence that they already have. This we can't give them, because it is a gift of God, reserved for those whom He has chosen to receive His gift of love. Faith is not merely coming to the right conclusion, or making a decision, although it surely does involve both, but faith is a fundamental change of heart and mind that affords the missing human capacity **to** derive the right conclusion and **to** make the right decision. Secular mankind will intentionally suppress, deny, and question the obvious facts to accommodate their personal affections and desires for sin and lust. But, because the evidence is so clear and irrefutable, God says *that they are without excuse*.

What exactly does God mean by *they are without excuse*? Essentially that they will be held fully accountable for their intentional suppression of the truth of God's *eternal power and divine nature*. (v.20) They deny His existence and eternal power **because** they dislike His divine nature. God is holy and righteous, and mankind is neither of these, and moreover doesn't want to be. The holy scriptures do not attribute the denial of God to ignorance, but to a stubborn refusal to repent of sins. Almost everyone is familiar with the quote from Jesus recorded in John 3:16, regarding God sending His only beloved Son into the world as a Savior to all who would believe in Him, but very few, I perceive, could quote the next sentence out of Christ's mouth after those words. And what did He say?

18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. (Jn 3:18-19)

To be perfectly clear, the term “light” as it’s used in this sentence is a metaphor for “truth” and darkness represents “suppressed truth” and denial of that truth, because of a predisposition to evil deeds. Humanity loves to sin, and they will suppress anything and everything they need to, to justify their continued practicing of it. Mankind loves darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

Now I’ve spent a lot of time on this point because everything that comes after this rests firmly upon this. As we made reference to earlier, every journey, no matter how long, starts with the first step, and every string of consequence has a first cause that started it all. The road to perdition has a first step, a first cause, from which every other consequence eventually proceeds forth, and the holy scriptures tell mankind what that first step is. That first cause is “not believing God.” The initial fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden, and all the subsequent consequences on humanity, was not because Adam and Eve didn’t believe that God existed, but that they didn’t believe what He said about eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They apparently didn’t really believe that they would truly die. Of course we know that Satan had a hand in that decision, but it finally came down to whether they really believed what God said or they did not.

The resultant effects of that decision to disobey God had both immediate and long term consequences for Adam and Eve, and eventually for every human who would ever come after them. Sin entered the world by a single first cause event, an act of disobedience resulting from not believing what God had said. Obviously, God takes His word very seriously, deadly serious even. And there are inescapable consequences of our actions, whether we want to believe it or not.

Once we take that first step in the wrong direction, then the path we’re on has its own progressive pattern of events and characteristics, like links in a chain, each building upon the previous. These next verses continue to explain the sequential signs of being on that wrong road. The road to perdition.

Verse 21-23: (Step 2 - SUBSTITUTION)

21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Romans 1:21-23 (NASB)

Paul begins his explanation of step 2 with a brief summation of step 1. He says, *For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks.* You see, there’s no such thing as not believing that God is, the glory of creation, with its incomprehensible complexities of perfect balances and interactions, makes God’s existence a total forgone conclusion, a “no brainer” in today’s vernacular. God’s declaration is that He has provided much more visible evidence than is necessary to establish His existence and His eternal power and glory to these pitiful little creatures called humans.

With this firmly established, Paul says that even though they knew God, they refused to honor Him as God, or even give Him thanks for His incredible creation and their own existence. But of course this denial of God leaves an enormous void that can’t be ignored. Because we humans were created with an understanding of logic, we are aware that all of this stuff we see around us had to come from somewhere. And if it wasn’t created by someone of immense intellect and power, then where did it all come from? There’s just no avoiding that question. And now Paul is going to tell us long before it happens that stubborn mankind will devise a whole host of absurd speculations and hair brained theories to try to fill that infinite void left by the denial of what they **know to be true** but **insist on suppressing**; that only a wise and powerful and living God could have made this whole thing that we call creation.

But a stubborn, sin-loving mankind will not accept that conclusion, regardless of the fact that it’s both logically and scientifically irrefutable. So if it is irrefutable, then why does man still try to refute it, that’s the real question, isn’t it? And it really has a very simple answer. If it were somehow possible to completely detach, and strip away, all of the obvious moral implications of creation by an intelligent designer, and be able to simply form a conclusion from the scientific facts and pure logic, there would be absolutely no evolutionists in existence. The evidence itself is irrefutable, it’s the moral implications of accepting that evidence that produces the endless array of futile speculations to the contrary. It would be humorous if it wasn’t so tragic. I am absolutely certain that mankind would swear they believed that the tooth fairy created

the universe before they accepted that God created it. Because the tooth fairy imposes no moral restrictions on their behaviors. In fact, the tooth fairy is probably a much more credible possibility than random mutations of cells and unaided natural evolution.

The point of this is, that when man decides to intentionally suppress the obvious truth, then he realizes that he must offer some kind of alternative, because the question doesn't go away. So men with credentials and titles concoct alternatives to God that an eagerly awaiting public is desperately looking for. Some way to appease the fears of God's ultimate wrath that they know accompanies their intentional suppression of the truth that's in them. So, when they get an alternative that offers them some relief they grab onto it and hold on for dear life. They'll tenaciously defend their foolish theories, not so much because they really believe them, but because their hopes of avoiding the wrath of God rests upon them. To concede the error, and even obvious absurdity of their theories is to accept their fate, and that's precisely what they will not do.

The alternatives include many and diverse fictitious gods also. Many people, who realize the untenable nature of natural evolution, create their own gods instead, but these man-made gods don't hold mankind to the same standards of morality as the true God, so they get the best of both worlds, they get a god, or gods, that explain creation, but at the same time leave them free of the moral restraints of the real God. This is simply another form of the same suppression of the truth. But the fact is, the false gods of man's making are often more violent and perverse than the people who concocted them.

Sometimes these alternative gods arise out of pure superstition and native culture, but other times they are devised by men of professed higher learning, and based on scientific evidence which they twist to meet their preconceived intentions. Paul says *they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened*. Here we start to see some effects of intentional suppression of the truth, in that it results in man's heart becoming darkened to the truth that they received from God. They repeat the lie so often that they almost come to believe it themselves, or maybe they actually can convince themselves that it's actually true. A darkened heart is one that cannot rightly analyze the information available and come to a right conclusion, because their own innate prejudices contaminate the data. So to them, their faulty conclusions can seem to make sense, when filtered through their own darkened and foolish hearts.

When the suppression of known truth progresses to this point, and the heart is darkened, and the mind has become foolish, the natural progression of events is to concoct alternatives. To make an exchange. To intentionally exchange the glory of an incorruptible and holy living God, for something else that isn't so demanding and intimidating. In light of the situation this is a perfectly logical progression. Where we create a gaping hole in our lives, we look for something with which to fill it up. And this leads to the endless array of false gods and imaginary deities and bizarre idols and theories that fills the whole world to this very day. All made by mankind to fill the hole that's left by intentionally suppressing the known truth about God.

All of this that we've discussed so far, man has done to himself, by himself, of his own choosing, because he refuses to honor God and give Him thanks for their lives. These are the **root causes** for everything that Paul is going to describe next, which things are God's reaction to these root causes. There are godly orchestrated consequences to intentionally suppressing the known truth about God. Some of those consequences are reserved for the future, but some of them are made for the immediate present. And Paul is going to give us a description of the immediate tell-tale signs that a society is suffering from the godly orchestrated consequential affects of denying the true God, refusing to give Him thanks, and exchanging His glory for man-made substitutes. We'll begin this next week at verse 24, which we'll call **(Step 3 - CONSEQUENCES)**

Conclusion:

If, and when we see that the godly orchestrated consequences are already happening, we know that the cause has been seen by God and the resultant effects are already underway. In our next verses, which we'll be examining next week, we'll be looking at those consequences in detail, and by them we'll be able to assess the situation of our nation and our society. Is it possible that our nation is already on that fateful road to perdition? Join us again next week.

To Him be the glory. Amen

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