

# **ROMANS**

Part 3: “Our Desperate, Cosmic Need for the Gospel”

Romans 1:18–25

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## **Scripture Reading**

*“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” (Rom 1:18–25).*

## **Introduction**

In the letter this letter to the Romans, Paul intends to take the Roman church along a theological journey. He desires to unfold the contours of the gospel in higher definition than he does in any other New Testament letter.

Thus far, he has introduced himself, addressed his readers, and stated his thesis—that the gospel is the power of salvation for all who believe; for both Jew and gentile. With those anchor points established, he will now launch the first phase of his message in Romans. That first phase is to convince all of his readers—including us—that Jesus is our *only* hope. He wants to convince his readers—including us—of our desperate, cosmic need for salvation that only Christ can bring.

In other words, before we can realize just how glorious the good news of the gospel is, we have to soberly understand the reality of the bad news concerning our situation outside of Christ. Salvation is only necessary if there is need to be saved. Grace only works if there is guilt that needs to be forgiven.

Thus, the passage we are reading to today operates almost like the opening arguments of a prosecuting attorney, who seeks to convince us of the guilt of the accused. And, who are the accused? *We are*. Paul is painting a picture of who we are outside of Christ.

And not only is Paul an attorney. He is an exceptionally brilliant attorney. The way his argument takes shape is surprising and unexpected in many ways. So, for the rest of our time today, I want to unfold three surprising ideas from Paul's argument that expose our need for the gospel. Those ideas are: 1.) *The Knowledge About God*, 2.) *The Substitutes for God*, and 3.) *The Wrath of God*.

By way of warning, today, we will be swimming in deep waters. But sometimes the greatest treasures lie in the greatest depths.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) The Knowledge About God**

Today, there are some loud voices in popular culture who mock people of faith for believing in God. "There is no evidence," they say. "Faith is the opposite of reason," they claim. Some will go so far as to say, "If you have faith in God, why would it be any different if I put my faith in a Flying Spaghetti Monster." After all, in their minds, there is just as much evidence for God as there is evidence of a Flying Spaghetti Monster."

And, just so you know, I'm not making that image up [show image of the 1FSM]. The whole idea of a Flying Spaghetti Monster is a term that is often used in the atheist/agnostic communities as a satire against religion in general and belief in the Christian God in particular.

There was a time of my life wherein I would have pridefully looked down on people of faith as well. I was definitely curious about God. But I wasn't going to believe in him unless I saw some irrefutable evidence that would satisfy my intellectual arrogance.

And that is why what Paul does here in Romans 1 absolutely *confounded* me the first time I read it. Notice what Paul does not do. He does argue for the existence of God. He does not attempt to lay out a carefully constructed rational proof. He does not appeal to sophisticated intelligent design arguments. He simply tells his readers: "*Let's be honest, in your heart of hearts you already know that there is God to whom you are accountable.*"

Look again back at the text, beginning in verse 19: "*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*" (Rom 1:19–20).

To be human is to have, at some level, an inherent awareness of divinity. Even if it is doubted or suppressed, humans have been confronted with the ever-present reality of God. We intuitively know that there is one to whom we owe our being and to whom we are obligated to serve. This is why the vast majority of all humans in all of history—from

every culture and on every continent—have had some sort of spirituality, some sort of religious expression to acknowledge that which is transcendent.

As the Protestant reformer John Calvin once wrote, “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy.”<sup>1</sup>

We have within us an innately revealed knowledge that there is an eternal God who is the very fountain and foundation of reality. And Paul is boldly claiming that that knowledge is universally present across human culture.

This innate knowledge of God’s existence is why we grieve when the world is not the way it should be—because we intuitively know that there is a way that the world should be; a way that God *made* it to be. It’s why we know that all meaning and morality are more than human inventions. It is why we recognize goodness, truth, and beauty; and it is also why we recoil from their opposites.

At our core, we know that there is not just a difference between what is good and what is evil. We know that there is a sense of moral *obligation* to do what is right and to say what is true. That sense of moral obligation is impossible outside of the existence of a personal God who is the standard and judge of what is right and true.

However, just because we all have this knowledge does not mean we all worship God. In fact, the reality of the fallen human condition is that we, by nature, resist and resent God’s Lordship.

We actively “suppress the truth” of God in our hearts and minds because we do not like the ramifications of that truth (cf. Eph 2:1–2).

Thus, for those who have eyes to see, the evidence of God’s reality is all around us. But for those who refuse to see, no evidence for the existence of God could ever be enough.

For, in place of the true God, our hearts have turned inward and outward instead of upward. And that leads us to our second point.

## **2.) The Substitutes for God**

Here the Apostle Paul makes another very surprising argument. He will show us that at the very heart of irreligion, there remains a *religious* level of devotion. At the very heart of our rejection of God is the reality that we have exalted—and substituted—something else into the place of God.

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<sup>1</sup> “Awareness of divinity” comes from the Latin “*Divinitatis sensum*.” This term and “seed of religion,” used immediately below (cf. I. iv. 1), refer generally to a numinous awareness of God, and are closely related to conscience, which is a moral response to God. Cf. I. i. 3 and Comm. John 1:5, 9. On verse 5, Calvin writes: “There are two principal parts of the light which still remains in corrupt nature: first, the seed of religion is planted in all men; next, the distinction between good and evil is engraved on their consciences.” Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iv.1.

Let's look back at the text: *"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things"* (Rom 1:21–23).

Now, there is something interesting about those last few verses that might not be apparent at first glance. Paul intentionally loads these verses with the language from Genesis chapter 1, particularly the passage in which God creates man and woman in his image and gives them dominion over creation.

This is Genesis 1:26–27, and every word that is written in bold is a word that appears again in Romans 1: *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our **image**, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the **birds** of the heavens and over the **livestock** and over all the earth and over every **creeping thing** that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the **image** of God he created him; **male** and **female** he created them"* (Gen 1:26–27).<sup>2</sup>

By using this language, Paul is showing us that sin twists, distorts, and unravels the goodness of God's good creation.

Instead of worshiping God and bearing his image, humanity rejects the Lordship of God and worships creation rather than the Creator. Instead of having dominion over creation, our disordered desires subject us to and enslave us under the tyranny of sin.

In the Bible, there is a technical term for worshiping some aspect of creation in place of God. We call this *idolatry*. Idolatry is what happens when we take anything—it could even be a good thing—and we make it into an ultimate thing. It is what happens when a god-substitute becomes that which captivates our imagination, demands our allegiance, and becomes a central, non-negotiable part of our identity.

Our disordered desires beget idols, and idols beget sins that destroy individuals, marriages, families, communities, and nations. As the biblical scholar, Ernst Käsemann once wrote, *"Idolatry opens the floodgates for vices which destroy society and turn creation back into terrible chaos."*<sup>3</sup>

Next week, when we conclude our study of chapter 1, we will see that there is a whole constellation of sinful behaviors that flow from our various idols. In fact, I had initially planned to preach the remainder of chapter 1 today, but I decided that the remaining verses required time for a whole other sermon (and if you read ahead, you will understand why!).

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<sup>2</sup> My comparison of these two texts derives from the Greek manuscript of Romans 1 and the Septuagint rendering of Genesis 1:26–27. The Septuagint (LXX) is the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures.

<sup>3</sup> Käsemann, *Romans*, 49.

But, for now, what I want you to see is that all sin flows from the disordered desires of the heart. Sin is the natural outcome of having substituting or exchanging the glory of the immortal God for lesser, transient things.

In this spiritual condition, the worst thing that could happen to us is that God allows us to have the very idols that would destroy us. And that leads us to our final point.

### **3.) The Wrath of God**

In many ways, this entire passage is framed by the idea of God's wrath. Indeed, it is the first concept in the first verse of our reading, *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth"* (Rom 1:18).

Now, when you think about the wrath of God, what images typically come to mind? Maybe it is God's cataclysmic judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. Maybe it is hell, fire, and brimstone. Maybe it is God hurling thunderbolts from the sky.

However, that is not the way Paul presents the wrath of God in Romans 1. Here Paul describes "the wrath of God" as something that is must be *"revealed"* (Αποκαλύπτεται). It is a spiritual reality that is initially hidden and must be unveiled in order to be seen and known.

And what has been unveiled about the wrath of God?

That question is answered in the concluding verses of our passage today: *"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen"* (Rom 1:24-25).

The wrath of God is whenever we choose creation over the Creator, God lets us have what we want. We are *given over* to the lusts of our hearts. Our rebellion becomes its own punishment. Our idols become our tyrants. Our sins become our slave masters.

So, if you want to make sex and romance your idol. So be it. But it will shatter and break your heart.

If you want to make approval and acceptance your idol. Okay. But your life will be terrorized and ruled by the fear of man.

If you want to make career advancement and ambition your idol. You can chase it. But your soul will never know rest, and it may require you to sacrifice your family.

If you want to make power your idol. Very well. But you may have to compromise your integrity to acquire it and maintain it.

You want to make money and material wealth your idol. Go for it. But it will never satisfy you, and you will never feel you have enough.

This is the wrath of God.

Unlike Christ, who gives his life to save us and whose kindness leads us to repentance, our idols are cruel, merciless gods. They demand allegiance and promise judgment if they are not appeased by our sacrifices.

But here's the thing, even though our idols abuse and oppress us, many times our gut response is to defend our idols with hostility if they are ever confronted or challenged. I can tell you a someone who has preached the word of God for the last fifteen years, I always know when I've hit an idol.

We revolt with irrational anger when our idols are named and unmasked by God's word. But here is what I want you to see: God's confrontation of our idols is not his wrath—it is his *mercy*.

Jesus is Lord—all other gods must be dethroned in our hearts.

Our Redeemer is worthy of more than half-hearted allegiance or lukewarm devotion. As God spoke to Moses in giving him the Ten Commandments: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me"* (Exod 20:2–3). That is commandment number one.

And the first commandment is an issue of first importance in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church.

## **Conclusion**

Now, even though this is a deep, surprising, and in many ways a mysterious passage, this section of Romans has been so crucial in my own life.

When I was a sophomore in college, I really was an agnostic. I truly believed that if I were to believe in God, I needed an irrefutable argument. I thought I needed scientific evidence.

But what Romans 1 showed me was that the irrefutable argument had already been made. The evidence of God's existence was already all around me.

Scripture forced me to be honest with myself and admit I already knew that there was a God. But I suppressed this truth because I did not want to acknowledge the ramifications.

I wanted my idols, my counterfeit gods, my substitute messiahs. But as the Holy Spirit of God opened my heart, I saw that my idols were leading me to despair and destruction. For the first time, I understood my desperate, cosmic need for the gospel.

And as the reality of God became unignorable in my heart, I knew that I wasn't smart enough to figure him out. I wasn't determined enough to perfectly obey his will. And I certainly was not virtuous enough to earn his love and approval.

My only hope was that when I could not come to God, God would come to me; that when I could not understand God, the Holy Spirit would reveal his truth to me; that when I was unclean in my sin, Christ's perfect righteousness would be given to me.

I pray that the Holy Spirit would allow every heart in this room to truly know those same truths! I pray that God would open your eyes to see his glory as he did mine nearly two decades ago.

The eternal God whose mystery is sensed in all human hearts has been revealed in Jesus Christ! He is the visible image of the invisible. He is better than all idols and rivals. He exposes our counterfeit gods in his mercy so that he might satisfy us with infinite joy.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we know and worship him. May we dethrone all of the idols in our hearts. And may we embrace and rest in the gift of his mercy!

AMEN.

### **Discussion Starters for Gospel Community**

1.) Read Romans 1:18–25 out loud

2.) This passage states that all humans possess a basic knowledge of God at some level but that many suppress that truth. What motivates us in suppressing the truth of God, do you think? How have you seen this tendency play out in your life or the lives of others?

3.) This passage speaks to exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or creatures. We might simply call this tendency idolatry. What do you feel like are the most tempting idols in your own life? How might you seek to exalt Christ in place of those idols in your heart?

4.) How does Paul envision the wrath of God in Romans 1 and how does this differ from the typical ways we might imagine the wrath of God?