

Without Excuse

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Unashamed: Paul's Magnum Opus / Romans 1:18–23

Every sunrise. Every mountain range. Every star-filled sky points beyond itself to the glory of God. According to Romans 1, creation is not silent. It testifies. God has made Himself known, leaving humanity without excuse. Yet the human heart suppresses that truth, choosing lesser gods over the Creator Himself. The Apostle Paul reminds us of the sobering reality of human rebellion and the reason every person desperately needs the Gospel.

Introduction

- A few months ago, my family took a trip out west, and one of the places we visited was the Grand Canyon.
 - And honestly, no picture prepares you for it.
 - You can look at photographs your entire life.
 - You can watch documentaries filmed with helicopters and drones.
 - You can hear people describe it with all the right adjectives.
- But then you walk up to the edge for the first time...
 - ...and something happens to you.
 - Your mind almost struggles to process what your eyes are seeing.
 - **I love this picture I took of Matthew because it helps to capture a sense of the overwhelming scale.**
 - Layer upon layer of stone carved down through the earth.
 - Walls stretching for miles in every direction.
 - Depths so vast they almost don't look real.
 - Shadows settling into places the sunlight cannot reach.
- The Grand Canyon is so massive that normal measurements stop helping.

- You can say it's 277 miles long and over a mile deep... but your brain still can't really process it.
- There are literal mountains inside the canyon itself.
- The Colorado River that carved it looks like a tiny thread from the rim, even though parts of that river are hundreds of feet across.
- The whole thing is so vast that your mind keeps trying to shrink it down into something manageable, and there's no box that you can ever fit it into.
- And standing there at the edge of it all, the noise in your head suddenly gets very quiet.
 - The emails don't matter.
 - The deadlines don't matter.
 - The little kingdoms we spend our lives building suddenly feel very small.
- Because there are places in creation that refuse to let you believe you are at the center of the universe.
 - For a moment, you become deeply aware that you are standing inside something far bigger than yourself.
 - And I think every human being knows that feeling.
 - There is something inside of us that instinctively recognizes awe.
 - Something that understands transcendence before we can even explain it.
 - [Romans 1](#) says that creation is doing something like that constantly.
- The world around us is not silent.
 - The heavens declare the glory of God.
 - The mountains testify.
 - The stars preach.

- Creation itself bears witness to the power, majesty, and eternal nature of the God who made it.
- Not because God has hidden Himself, but because mankind suppresses the truth made known through creation.
- Let's go ahead and turn our attention to this week's passage - [Romans 1:18-23](#).

Scripture Reading

Romans 1:18–23 ESV

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

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. So they are without excuse.

²¹ 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.

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

- Last week, we took a look at Paul's thesis statement for this letter - verses 16-17.
 - Without apology, Paul told the church in Rome that he was not ashamed of the Gospel.
 - In the Gospel, God made known to us his righteousness.

- We can see both our bankruptcy in righteousness and God's revelation of righteousness.
- Our righteousness comes up short so we need a better righteousness.
- One of the reasons the Gospel is good news is because in it, unrighteous humans are given the righteousness of God.
- Now you would expect that a statement like that would be followed with an explanation of the Gospel.
 - But that's not what we get.
 - Instead, Paul begins a very carefully constructed argument intended to expose our great need for the Gospel.
 - After all, if we don't recognize why we need the Gospel, then we will never seek to embrace the Gospel.
 - So Paul begins to strip away, piece by piece, all of the things we hide behind.
 - And by the time he is finished, we are going to be left completely exposed and desperately in need.
- And beginning here in v. 18, he begins his case against us by first revealing the wrath of God.

The Revelation of Wrath (v. 18)

- We don't particularly like this part.
 - In fact, man has been trying to "think" away the wrath of God for some time.
 - Lord Bertrand Russell wrote in his book, *Why I am Not a Christian*:

There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment... You do not, for instance, find that attitude in Socrates. You find him quite bland and urban toward the people

who would not listen to him, and it is, to my mind, far more worthy of a sage to take that line than to take the the line of indignation.

- This idea of a God of wrath offends the sensibilities of modern man who would much rather Jesus be our buddy rather than our judge.
- Russell thought Socrates was more dignified than Jesus because Socrates remained bland toward those who rejected him.
 - But Socrates wasn't the Creator of the universe, and the people rejecting him weren't suppressing the truth that held the moral fabric of reality together.
 - However, the indignation Russell saw in Jesus isn't vindictiveness — it is the perfectly just response of a righteous God to cosmic treason.
 - To reject God is not merely to disagree with a teacher; it is to rebel against the One who made us, sustains us, and deserves our worship and absolute allegiance.
 - You see, baked into the worldview of skeptics like Russell is the idea that people are generally good and undeserving of God's wrath.
 - But the reality is this: We have a deeply flawed understanding of our standing before a holy God.
 - We're not a good people who are being handed a cruel and unusual punishment.
 - And that's exactly the argument that Paul is building.
- Because, you need to understand - what is going on here is important.
 - Paul is building a case.
 - [Romans 1-3](#) reads like a courtroom, and humanity is on trial.
 - By the time Paul is finished, every mouth will be shut, and the whole world will be held accountable to God.
- The argument he is making here is very straightforward.

- Because God is a God of righteousness, he must necessarily be a God of wrath.
- You cannot be righteous and turn a blind eye toward sin... otherwise you are no longer righteous.
- A judge who simply ignores guilt isn't merciful — he's corrupt.
- Part of the reason we are offended by the notion of God's wrath is because our understanding of wrath is distorted by our own fallenness.
- When Paul describes God's wrath here, he's not describing the kind of anger we're familiar with — the hot, explosive, out-of-control rage that we see in human beings, or in the capricious little-g-gods of the ancient world who hurled lightning bolts on a whim.
 - Paul is describing something altogether different.
 - This is wrath that is settled. Controlled. Deliberate.
 - It is the steady, active opposition of a perfectly holy God toward everything that is not holy.
 - There is nothing impulsive about it. Nothing arbitrary.
 - It is the inevitable, just response of perfect righteousness to sin.
- There is never an act that God takes against rebels that is uncontrolled or undisciplined.
- At the same time, God's wrath is perfectly just.
 - Consider the fact that Paul says that wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.
 - It isn't just revealed against a certain class of people or a certain race of people.
 - This is actually *good news* for people who have experienced injustice.
 - A God without wrath is a God who shrugs at evil.
 - The abuse victim, the oppressed, the wronged — they don't want a God who tolerates wickedness.

- Wrath is the flip side of a God who takes righteousness seriously.
- And all ungodliness and unrighteousness is in his sights, not just a list of pet peeves and divine triggers.
- **This is important, because if you know your Romans road, you know we're working toward Paul's conclusion later in [Rom. 3:23](#).**

Romans 3:23 **ESV**

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

- And all of it — every bit of that ungodliness and unrighteousness — is rooted in something Paul names right here in verse 18...the suppression of truth.
- This is a universal human sin.
- It doesn't matter if you have a PhD or a GED...this is part of our fallen nature.
- And it is this single sin that provokes God's wrath against all of humanity.
- That word suppression is a really important word.
- If you were to take a beach ball and try to hold it under the water in a swimming pool, you have to constantly wrestle with the ball to keep it under.
- It is constantly trying to come to the surface.
- That is what the word suppress means here.
- Truth is constantly trying to make itself known, but man is constantly trying to push it back.
- Man's problem isn't ignorance, it's resistance to what is clearly revealed...
- Paul doesn't leave us wondering about what kind of truth we are prone to suppress.
- He immediately points to creation to remind us.

The Clarity of Creation (vv. 19-20)

- When we visited the Grand Canyon and Zion earlier this year, the thing that kept coming to my mind is how small we were.
 - It is impossible to stand in those places and feel consequential.
 - Those places were telling a greater story.
 - And that's exactly the point that Paul is making here...Creation is testifying.
- Let me be clear...
 - Creation isn't testifying about the cross and the empty tomb.
 - Creation isn't explaining all the great mysteries of the faith.
 - The scope of Creation's sermon is limited, but what it teaches, it teaches with great clarity and absolute confidence.
- Paul tells us specifically what Creation teaches us about God.
 - It teaches us something about his eternal power.
 - It teaches us something about his divine nature.
- But v. 19 uses a very important word to further drive home this point.
 - Creation speaks "plainly."
 - The problem is not that creation whispers too softly.
 - The problem is that humanity covers its ears, like an angry toddler trying to drown out his father's rebuke.
 - The truth God has made known to us in creation about himself is not hiding in some ancient temple, waiting for Indiana Jones to come along and find it.
 - It is not hiding, it is not obscure. It is in plain sight.
 - Then why are there atheists and agnostics and pagans and unbelievers?

- Because the truth of God's eternal power and divine nature, clearly perceived from the very beginning...they are being constantly suppressed by our fallen nature.
- Every attempt to explain away God ultimately collides with the testimony that has been woven into creation from the very beginning.
- And we should be careful not to imagine this is merely the sin of atheists, philosophers, or intellectual elites.
- Truth suppression is a universal human problem.
- We all have a natural tendency to push away the reality of God when that reality confronts our autonomy, our pride, and our sin.
- And that suppression has tremendous consequences.

The Sin of Suppression (vv. 20b-21)

- The end of v. 20 is an explosive truth claim.
- “So they are without excuse...”
 - Earlier this year, I had to have some surgery on my eye.
 - As I was getting ready to have the surgery, the surgeon came by to talk with me and explain everything that could go wrong and explain why the results might not be as good as they could be.
 - I signed a document that you've probably signed if you've ever had a medical procedure performed.
 - It's called an “informed consent” document.
 - And basically it means that I can't go back to the doctor and say, “I didn't know.”
- Paul is saying the same thing here...
 - Creation is preaching so plainly that nobody can say, “I didn't know...”
 - Creation's witness is the divine “informed consent” statement.

- You cannot deny God's character or his nature because he has made it clearly known through what He has made.
- There is no plea of ignorance before the LORD.
- But Paul's indictment goes deeper...
 - Look at v. 21 again...

Romans 1:21 ESV

²¹ 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.

- Creation speaks so plainly that every single person has been shown God's nature and power.
- It is so plainly obvious to them...
 - When you drive up to Lookout Mountain in the late afternoon and sit on one of the west-facing bluffs, there will come a beautiful moment where the sun dips below Sand Mountain.
 - We call that sunset...
 - It is undeniable.
 - For someone to claim they didn't know of God's power and nature would be as absurd as you driving away from that spot on Lookout Mountain claiming that the sun is still high in the sky.
 - You can make those claims, but in order to do so, you have to suppress the truth.
- God's wrath is revealed because we do know Him.
 - The problem is what we do with that knowledge.
 - Paul says we refuse to honor God or give thanks to him.
 - Instead we take that knowledge and, instead of worshiping the creator - we make idols.
- And sure, we can argue the point.

- But even our arguments are invalid.
- Because the source of our arguments - our thoughts are from a place of futility.
- The problem is not that unbelievers cannot think intelligently.
- The problem is that suppression distorts how fallen humanity interprets God, truth, morality, and reality itself.
- Why do people who are far from the LORD seem so hell-bent on staying that way?
- Because the suppression of truth has corrupted their thinking about the reality of God.
- And you better believe it takes a toll on the heart as well.
- Paul says their foolish hearts were darkened.
 - You need to know that the word foolish isn't primarily about what you know or don't know.
 - It's not about being a victim to bad ideas.
 - The idea of foolishness in the Bible is first a moral deficiency.
 - After all, "the fool says in his heart 'There is no God.'"
 - Foolishness is denying what is true.
 - And what are we talking about here, suppressing the truth.
 - The fool looks at that which is plainly true and says that it isn't.
 - The fool watches the sunset and denies it.
 - And as we'll see next week, once truth is suppressed long enough, humanity begins embracing ideas and desires that become increasingly detached from God's design for the world.
- So what is the ultimate outcome of the sin of suppression?
 - There is an exchange that will eventually take place.

- Look at vv. 22-23

Romans 1:22–23 ESV

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

The Tragedy of the Trade (vv. 22-23)

- This is such an inversion of truth.
 - We know that God has made his nature and power known plainly to us in creation.
 - When we suppress the truth, by our nature, our thinking about God becomes corrupt and our hearts grow dim.
- But instead of pursuing this God who has made himself known, we seek to pursue lesser things.
 - We think we're so smart.
 - We are so enlightened.
 - We have answers for so many of our great problems.
 - We can build incredible monuments of human ingenuity.
 - We can fill libraries with volumes of books and resources.
 - We can send spaceships and probes to far flung corners of the solar system.
 - We can build complicated computer systems that even mimic human reason.
 - But as smart as we are, Paul's warning is clear.
 - We can be so wise, yet remain so profoundly foolish.
 - And in doing so, we pursue a multitude of lesser gods.

- Claiming to be wise, humanity becomes spiritually bankrupt, denying the very truth that gives meaning to reality itself.
- And that is the very definition of foolishness.
- How foolish exactly?
 - Instead of worshiping the creator, we elevate the creation.
 - Such a stunning reversal.
 - Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.
 - We are given dominion over creation.
 - And instead of casting our eyes upward to the divine, we bow our knees to that which is created.
 - Creation spends every moment pointing us back to God, and humanity keeps worshiping the sign instead of the One to whom it points.
- Most people who deny the reality of God made known in creation don't become atheists.
 - They become religious.
 - They become idolaters.
 - I believe it was Calvin who said that the human heart is a factory of idols.
 - Instead of worshiping the God whose image they bear, they create idols in their own image.
 - Did you ever notice how all of the Greek and Roman gods are morally compromised and ethically flawed?
 - Did you ever notice how all of the idols that the Jews wrestled with were perverse, demanding all kinds of sensuality and child sacrifice?
 - Why would people worship that which is so morally flawed?

- Because they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man.
- Idols are always made in our own image.
- I know, we're too sophisticated to bow in front of carved images today.
 - But let us not think we have outgrown the condition Paul is diagnosing here.
 - Humanity is still remarkably skilled at creating gods that look suspiciously like ourselves.
 - Our modern idols are just as dangerous even if they aren't quite as overt as our ancestors'.

Invitation

- This feels like bad news.
 - In a lot of ways, that's what a prosecutor is doing.
 - A prosecutor's job isn't to make the accused feel good about themselves.
 - The job of the prosecutor is to lay out the evidence so that the jury will convict without any reasonable doubt.
 - Walking through every exhibit.
 - Every witness.
 - Every piece of condemning evidence.
 - That's what this is...
 - And in no uncertain terms, the verdict is in: "We have no excuse."
 - Not a single one of us.
 - Not the philosopher, not the skeptic, not the churchgoer who knows all the right answers.
 - Creation has been preaching since the beginning.

- The knowledge of God has been plain.
- And we have all, in our own way, held it under.
- (And just so you know, Paul a long way from resting his case).
- But it is vitally important that we understand this...
 - The Gospel is BAD NEWS before it is GOOD NEWS.
 - The bad news of the Gospel is that it doesn't tolerate unrighteousness.
 - And as we have just seen, we are masterminds at unrighteousness.
 - Our corruption runs so deep that it doesn't just affect our behavior — it distorts our thinking, darkens our hearts, and leads us to take the glory of the immortal God and trade it for something we made ourselves.
 - We are not just struggling.
 - We are not just a little off course.
- We are without excuse. And on our own, we are without hope.
 - But that little phrase is everything — *on our own*.
 - Because the Gospel doesn't end with the prosecutor's case.
 - It ends with grace that intervenes where we could not.
 - A righteousness given to those who have none.
 - A God who, fully aware of the evidence against us, sent His Son anyway.
- That is what makes the good news so staggeringly good.
 - You cannot feel the weight of what Christ has done until you've felt the weight of what Paul is saying right here.
 - And maybe that is exactly where some of you are this morning.
 - You have spent years suppressing what you know to be true.
 - Explaining away conviction.

- Drowning out the voice of conscience.
- Trading the glory of God for lesser things that cannot satisfy and cannot save.
- [Romans 1](#) is not merely trying to make you feel condemned.
- It is trying to bring you to the end of yourself.
- Because you cannot be rescued until you first realize you are lost.
- And the glory of the Gospel is that Christ stepped into the courtroom for guilty people.
 - The Judge Himself made a way for rebels to be forgiven.
 - The wrath we deserved was poured out on Christ so that the righteousness we did not deserve could be given to us by grace.
 - So stop suppressing the truth.
 - Stop running from the God creation has been pointing you toward your entire life.
 - Turn to Christ.
 - Because the same God whose righteousness reveals His wrath, is also the God whose mercy sent His Son to save sinners without excuse.