

No Excuses – Part 1

Romans 1:19-20

March 5, 2017

Introduction:

Excuses. We've all made them. We do our best to provide reasons why we should be allowed to escape the consequences of our failure to do something or be somewhere we should have been. This is especially the case when it comes to missing school or for not turning in an assignment on time. Teachers, it seems, have a wealth of experience in hearing all kinds of excuses. I made a quick internet search for school excuses and came across no shortage of funny excuses teachers have heard over the years. Let me offer a few examples. One note said this,

Please excuse Jenny for missing school yesterday. We forget to get the Sunday paper off the porch. and when we found it Monday, we thought it was Sunday.

The next note was a creative way to excuse a poor test result. It said,

Please excuse my son for doing so poorly on the test. The hour he puts aside to do homework and studying every week was lost when the clocks "sprung forward" for Daylight Savings Time.

The final note was one that I could easily have made for myself,

Please excuse Eric from school yesterday. He was waiting in line to purchase tickets for the new Star Wars film.

Let's face it: we're good at making excuses, although not many of our excuses are all that good. The Bible frequently illustrates our proclivity for making excuses. When confronted about eating the forbidden fruit, Adam made the excuse, "The woman you gave me – she gave it to me." Then Eve did no better, blaming the serpent for deceiving her. Perhaps the lamest excuse in the Bible was Aaron's attempt to explain to Moses the creation of the golden calf. He claimed, "I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (Exodus 32:24). Sure, Aaron, blame the fire for magically spitting out a golden idol. Good luck with that!

The apostle Paul recognizes how we like to make excuses and today's passage is his way of showing us that when it comes to God's wrath, we are without excuse. Last week we saw how God's wrath is being revealed against all of mankind, but Paul is anticipating an objection to that idea this morning. He's envisioning someone coming up with the excuse, "Well, I didn't know there even was a God." It's an excuse we often come across even today. What about those Indians who live in the deep jungles of South America or those primitive tribes in Africa who have never heard the gospel or seen a Bible? Or what about the teenager with atheist parents who was isolated from any kind of religious influence growing up? Do they have an excuse that their ignorance allows them to avoid God's wrath? Is the absence of missionaries or Christian churches in their town a valid excuse?

So then, this morning we're going to answer this question: **Why is the wrath of God being justly revealed against all of mankind?** How is it that those who never heard of Christ, who never had access to a Bible or a church or ever had a missionary come to them, how can God still rightly punish them for their sin? Over the next two weeks we're going to consider three reasons why all men, regardless of where or when they were born, are without excuse for their sin and are therefore justly deserving of God's wrath. We're going to spend the entire time this morning unpacking the first reason and then next week, in part 2, we'll go over the last two. So then, let's begin with the primary reason God is justly revealing his wrath against all mankind, and that is...

1. Because they should have recognized God through the creation

Let's see how Paul explains this by opening your Bibles to Romans 1, which can be found on pg. 939 of the pew Bibles if you don't have your own with you. We'll be going our attention to v. 19-20 today, but let's start reading at v. 18 to keep the larger context of the passage in mind. Paul writes, **"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."**

Paul begins in v. 19 by saying that, **"What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them."** This is a general statement of what he's going to make more specific in the next verse. There are things one can know about God that is plain to everyone because God has revealed it to them. So, two questions come out of that: what about God is it that everyone on earth should know and how has God gone about revealing this to us? Paul fleshes this out with specifics in v. 20. Look there.

The answer to the first question is given at the beginning of v. 20. Paul says, **"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived..."** So, if nothing else, there are two aspects of God that everyone should recognize: his power and his divine nature. To perceive his divine nature means simply to realize there is a God and secondly, that as God he is infinitely powerful. That is a basic level of knowledge everyone should have.

But how do they receive such knowledge? The second question is answered in the latter half of v. 20 as Paul finishes the sentence saying these attributes of God **"have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made."** So, the material creation is the source of this basic, fundamental knowledge of God everyone has. When we look at creation, it should be clear to us that there is a God who exists and he must be magnificently powerful to have created it all.

This passage teaches what theologians refer to as "natural revelation." Through the natural world of waterfalls and mountains and oak trees and stars and planets, God

reveals something about himself that everyone can and should comprehend. This is perhaps most famously spelled out in Psalm 19 where it starts off by saying,

“The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.”

Romans 1 and Psalm 19 are saying the same thing. Creation is communicating truth to us about God everywhere to everyone. Though it is not communicated in words and in actual speech, nevertheless it is sufficient to “declare the glory of God” such that all can understand it.

The truth of this can be demonstrated by what we find among primitive cultures. Do you know what’s remarkable about primitive people? None of them are atheists. There’s no such thing as a primitive tribe of atheists. A belief in a supernatural being or beings is universally shared by humans everywhere, whether in Africa or the Amazon or the islands of the South Pacific. All these tribes look at the heavens and the seas and the land around them and come to the same basic conclusion: there exists a god or gods responsible for their world to whom they owe some kind of response. Paul’s statement here has been proven true repeatedly as isolated tribes and primitive cultures have been discovered. Material creation provides enough information for people in every continent on the planet to realize that some kind of powerful god or gods exist.

Now if this was true back in Paul’s day, that through creation we can perceive both the existence of God and his power, how much more so is it true for us who live in the world of modern science! In the ancient world, their view of the cosmos was far less informed than ours. Until the Greeks came along, people in the ancient world believed the world was flat and that the sky was a hard dome, a firmament which the sun, moon, and stars moved across and which separated the waters above that came down through openings in the form of rain. Yet despite their limitations and cosmological misunderstandings, they could discern enough that God was responsible for it all.

Now fast-forward to today. We know the sky doesn’t end with a solid dome located a few thousand feet above us. We know the sun is a star whose size is such that if it were an empty bowl it would take 1.3 million earths to fill it. We know those tiny twinkling stars are actually stars as big as if not much larger than our sun and whose distance from us is not measured in feet but in light years, with the most distance star we can see with the naked eye taking over 16,000 years for its light to reach us. We know those stars we see on a clear night sky are just a tiny fraction of the approximately 400 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy. And then it was in 1929 when Edwin Hubble discovered that our galaxy was not the limit of the universe, but rather other galaxies beyond our own are out there, the closest one being the Andromeda galaxy which is only a mere 2.5 million light years away. But that’s just one galaxy out of an estimated 200 billion galaxies, resulting in a rough calculation of there being over 1 billion trillion stars in the known universe.¹

To give you some idea of the size of that number, I read that for every grain of sand on every beach on earth, there are 10,000 stars.²

Then moving beyond astronomy, there are the discoveries of physics that reveal the incredible fine-tuning of the universe. Things such as strong and weak nuclear forces, electromagnetic forces, and gravity are at such precise values that should they differ in even the slightest manner, life could not exist in the universe, much less stars, planets, or galaxies. As the famed physicist and mathematician Freeman Dyson famously said, “The more I examine the universe, and the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the Universe in some sense must have known we were coming.”

Or as Cambridge astronomer Fred Hoyle said,

“A commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super-intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature. The numbers one calculates from the facts seem to me so overwhelming as to put this conclusion almost beyond question.”³

But let’s consider the creation on a much smaller level. Ancient people had no idea of things like cells and genes and DNA, but modern biological science has opened up an amazing world that exists at the microscopic level. For example, we now know the instructions for creating a human being (or any other living thing for that matter) is encoded in the double-helix strands of DNA. I’ve read that if you were to unwind all the DNA molecules in the human body and line them up end to end, they would have a total length of 10 billion miles, which is approximately the distance one would need to travel to Pluto and back.⁴

Then the amount of information contained in our DNA is staggering. One gram of DNA can store 700 terabytes of data, which is the equivalent of 14,000 blu-ray discs.⁵ And if this wasn’t incredible enough, while I was researching this sermon, I learned that scientists are exploring the idea of using DNA as a way for storing data, sort of like a living hard drive – which alone is simply mind-boggling – but get this: they estimate that one would need only the amount of DNA that could fit in a teaspoon to hold all human knowledge: every book, every photo, every song, every email or Facebook post.⁶

I go so easily on presenting you amazing discovery after discovery about creation, but I think it’s safe to say that if Paul could say to the Romans that they were without excuse with their limited ancient world understanding of creation, how much more are we without excuse in light of the marvels of creation we know today. Given all we know about the vastness of the universe, the perfect balancing of the laws of physics, the astonishing complexity of the cell, and so much more that modern science has revealed to us, how can we possibly deny that there must exist a Creator who so perfectly fashioned all that surrounds us and whose power must be unfathomable to have made a universe as vast and complex as ours.

So then, the wonders of creation are available for everyone to see, even if they live in a jungle and don't have telescopes and microscopes to explore the smallest molecule or the largest super nova. Everyone, no matter where you live, when you lived, or the level of technology you possess, has access to the created world, through which God has plainly revealed himself as the Almighty Creator God. Therefore, all men are without excuse. No one can claim, "You didn't give me enough information." God has revealed his presence and power throughout all of creation to all mankind.

So, with that said, let me make three applications from this passage that are important for us to keep in mind. This first is this...

a. General revelation tells us some things about God, but not everything.

Paul mentions two things about God that are revealed by the material creation. He mentions "**his eternal power and divine nature**" in v. 20, which as I said earlier means that through creation we are to recognize his divine nature in that God exists and second that he must be of infinite power. Creation does reveal that as can be seen by the universal religious belief that exists across human cultures.

But beyond that, natural revelation doesn't tell us all that much. Looking at creation, there's not much there to teach you anything about God's other attributes such as his mercy, or his love, or compassion, or grace. Looking out at creation, especially the animal world, you are struck by the harshness of it all. As Alfred Lord Tennyson once put it, nature is "red in tooth and claw," meaning that animals fight for survival and only the strongest survive, with the weaker becoming prey for the stronger. I've watched enough nature shows to see the brutality of nature: lions don't shown mercy to antelopes. Locust swarms don't weep over the barren devastation they leave behind. The spider is not compassionate to the fly who was caught in his web.

If nature is your only guide, then the powerful Creator God who must surely exist is not one to be trifled with. One would only have fear to guide you, because nature provides us no clues about his lovingkindness towards his creatures, only death to the weak and another day of life to the strong. The natural world doesn't give us a clue of how to enter into a right relationship with God or even come to know him beyond the intellectual awareness of his powerful existence.

So, while natural revelation teaches us truth about God, we need more than nature to reveal other aspects of God. Only in Scripture do we learn that this powerful God who created all things has loved us. Only the Bible teaches us that God is gracious and kind, merciful and compassionate, such that he sent his only begotten Son to come to suffer and die in our place. Only in God's Word can we learn that we can find forgiveness and the hope of eternal life through faith in Christ. Nature cannot tell you any of those things. No amount of mountain-climbing, hiking, scuba-diving, or time spent peering into microscopes or telescopes will reveal those aspects of God's character. God's revelation to us in nature reveals some of what we need to know, but not everything we could know.

Nevertheless, even though nature provides an accurate yet incomplete revelation of God, it still fulfills a purpose. God's revelation of himself as God Almighty to all men through creation allows God to be just in bringing wrath upon those who reject him. So, our second application is this...

b. General revelation is enough to damn but not to save

God has revealed himself such that all men, regardless of where and when they live, should recognize that he exists, that he's powerful, and consequently we should respond to him by honoring him and giving him thanks. But as we'll learn about next week once we get to v. 21-23, people have universally failed to do that. Even though they can recognize there's a God responsible for creating all things by his eternal power, they refused to respond to him rightly. Instead of embracing the truth they were given through natural revelation, they suppressed it. Thus, God is just and right to damn all men for their sin because everyone has been given enough revelation to make them responsible and yet each and every one rejected it, therefore they are all without excuse.

This is important to be clear on because it would not be just to punish people for not worshiping a God whom they had no idea existed. If creation revealed nothing about God, such that no matter how hard one tried, no matter how long one studied it, there would be no way to discern that God was behind it, then no one could be found guilty of not doing what he couldn't have known he should have done.

For example, consider how you reacted to your toddler when they did something they shouldn't have done but you know they didn't know any better. Back when Alexandra was about two years old, she went into the bathroom unbeknownst to us and started cutting her hair. By the time we found her, she had made short work of her pretty, long blond hair. But we didn't get mad at her. We didn't punish her. Why? Because she didn't know any better. We never told her that she shouldn't cut her own hair. She didn't know, so we didn't hold her responsible.

But with general revelation, God has told us about himself. He has revealed himself. He has made it plain to everyone that he exists and so all of humanity is rendered responsible by that revelation of himself through creation. Yet, since all have rejected it, God is just in revealing his wrath towards all mankind. Nature tells us enough to make us responsible to God, but doesn't tell us anything about his mercy and love, thus all general revelation can do is damn us, not save us.

Thus, it needs to be stated in no uncertain terms that no one is going to be saved by simply looking out at nature and reasoning their way to a correct understanding of God's saving grace in Christ. We're never going to discover some lost tribe living in the deep dark jungles of the Amazon who have been worshiping God in a manner pleasing to him or have already placed their trust in Christ as their savior. Nor does it matter how great your intellect is, or what highly technological tools you have at your disposal to study God's creation – it will never lead you to God's saving grace. I think of Carl Sagan, a brilliant astronomer who became a household name through his

widely popular PBS science show entitled *Cosmos*. Despite his great learning and insights into creation, he nevertheless rejected God as evidenced when Carl Sagan famously said, “The cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be...” He studied creation and yet suppressed the truth it revealed about God just as Paul said all men do. So then, seeing how creation only reveals enough about God to damn all men and that we need God’s special revelation found in Scripture in order to come to saving faith, this brings us to our third and final application this morning, which is this...

c. General revelation doesn’t undermine the need for missions

We cannot think that because God has revealed himself through creation we can leave to their own devices those who don’t have the Bible in their own language or who have no witness to the gospel in their community. Every unreached people group in the world has enough revelation of God through creation to damn them but not enough to save them and that’s where you and I come in. Jesus told us to go to all nations and make disciples because if we don’t go, they won’t come. Paul reminds us later in Romans 10 saying, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

If natural revelation was sufficient to save, missions would be unnecessary. The Great Commission would be unnecessary. What Paul just said in Romans 10 would be unnecessary. But since natural revelation is only sufficient to damn, missionary work is necessary. If we don’t go, they won’t believe. Salvation comes through faith in Christ and faith comes through the gospel that must be proclaimed.

So, we need to go and tell the world about Christ. We need to finish the story that natural revelation begins. We need to go and proclaim the gospel to those primitive tribes in the Amazon jungle and we need to go and proclaim the gospel to those sophisticated modern people who live in concrete jungles. As amazing as creation is, it can only take us so far. We have the responsibility to go, both near and far, both in our own backyard and to the other side of the globe, and tell them that the Creator God revealed in nature is also the Redeemer God who offers us salvation through faith in Christ.

Conclusion

With that, I invite you to join us for the second part of this sermon next week, as we consider what exactly our rejection of God’s revelation of himself through nature looks like and why that makes God’s wrath against mankind indeed right and just. But for now, won’t you please bow your heads as I close us in prayer? Let’s pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.

Endnotes

1. <http://biologos.org/common-questions/gods-relationship-to-creation/fine-tuning>
2. <http://waitbutwhy.com/2014/05/fermi-paradox.html>
3. <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/Nave.html/Faithpathh/Hoyle.html>
4. <http://factslegend.org/25-interesting-dna-facts/>
5. <http://www.extremetech.com/extreme/134672-harvard-cracks-dna-storage-crams-700-terabytes-of-data-into-a-single-gram>
6. <http://qz.com/345640/scientists-say-all-the-worlds-data-can-fit-on-a-dna-hard-drive-the-size-of-a-teaspoon/>