

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## The Epistle to the Romans: Sins: What about the primitive pagan? (Romans 1:19-32)

Good morning and welcome to the next talk in the series on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans.

In the days of ancient Rome, a citizen who had been born in Rome was held in great esteem and could travel anywhere within the empire and be viewed as someone who should be well looked after. In a sense, a good Roman could go anywhere. As we grew up in our local gathering of Christian believers, we often heard the same statement but in a different context. The "Good Roman" in our example referred to someone who had a good understanding of, and had grasped the wonderful concepts contained within this epistle that we are now privileged to be considering in this series of talks. It then follows that this person with such knowledge could go to any part of the Word of God and not be found wanting. As Paul exhorted Timothy, in 2 Timothy 2:15, to study diligently in order that he may rightly divide the word of truth. So it is important for us to be properly grounded in the basics of the Christian gospel and this is nowhere more clearly laid out than in the epistle to the Romans. It has often been referred to as a courtroom drama as Paul seeks to lay out the defence of the gospel.

The gospel, the good news of a happy God, or the glad tidings, is the greatest message that we could ever be involved in spreading and we have already seen in the earlier verses that the Apostle Paul was not ashamed of it, for he knew it was the power of God unto salvation. In Romans 1:19-32, the verses we are about to consider, we must remember that while some things may be difficult for us to understand in our own natural minds, it is not our responsibility so to do so but rather see them from God's perspective and proclaim them accordingly. I am always helped in considering these things with the story in Genesis 18 as Abraham engages in a very open and brisk dialogue with God. He was able to state, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*" (Genesis 18:25). This is God's work and is all about Him and His righteousness.

So, in these next three talks we will look at three groups of people and see how all three of them make up the whole world, nobody on earth could say they are not included somewhere in these descriptions. Paul's descriptions are based on the world as he knew it at that time but, by extension, we can still apply them to the whole world today. They are the primitive pagan, the sophisticated gentile, (Greek or Jew) and the religious Jew. The verses before us today, Romans 1:19-32, focus on the primitive world, the natural person with no access to religion or learning.

- How will they know about God and his righteousness?
- Why are they without excuse?

To consider this we must go back a long time. Right back to the creation in fact.

In Romans 1:19 where we start our considerations today we see that God has placed something in each and every one of us that is "of him". He has planted in our nature that which can be known of Him, in a sense a desire to reach out to something bigger and more powerful than ourselves. When God said in Genesis 1:26 "*Lets Us make man in our own image*", He was not referring to physical attributes or likeness in the way that we resemble our natural parents but in terms of something that links us to that which is beyond ourselves. I often look at my dog who we all love very much, and I am sure he loves us; however, he has no concept of anything bigger or greater than me. For him I am the zenith of creation, he has no God consciousness. Sadly, with the rise in secular atheism we are being told there is no God and that we are just the same as the animals, therefore that inbuilt part of us that looks for something bigger is left unanswered and frustrated. Is there any wonder then that so many problems exist in our relationships with each other and even with ourselves? Romans 1:20 therefore goes on to explain that in creation we should recognise God's eternal power and Godhead. The power in bringing the creation into being and His divine nature of faithfulness, kindness and graciousness to sustain things in perfect balance. This was once in the heart of the whole of mankind and was subsequently given up. After mankind had been judged by the flood in Noah's day (See Genesis 6:1-8:19) and God had brought Noah and his family through the judgment by way of the ark, the whole of mankind stood around an altar to the LORD (Genesis 8:20).

In Genesis 8:20-22 we read about Noah taking clean animals and birds and making offerings to the LORD which was said to be a soothing aroma to the LORD. He was thankful to God for the great salvation he had been brought into and showed this very forcibly. The whole world at that time, that is his immediate family, witnessed this and the blessing of God that followed was upon all. This should have been a wonderful starting point for the new post-Flood world to move forward from, but it did not happen as men stopped holding God in their minds and hearts and their conduct descended accordingly.

In very simple terms the wonder of the creation should be like seeing a wonderful painting, or hearing an amazing piece of music, perhaps you enjoy fine food, we would all love to meet the artist, composer or chef to be able to express our thanks and gratitude for their talent that has allowed us to have such an enjoyable experience. It would be rude not to, and yet how much more the beauty of creation all around us? I am reminded of one scientist of great faith many years ago who built a model of the solar system and invited his atheist fellow scientist friend round to see it. When he turned the handle and made all the planets rotate around the sun in perfect balance his friend exclaimed, without thinking I am sure, Who made it? The reply was that nobody made it!! The atheist scientist got the point that his friend was trying to make very quickly.

Romans 1:20 is very clear therefore that because of this initial knowledge of God in the world, the whole of mankind is *“without excuse”*. We might therefore still say, why? Romans 1:21 answers the question succinctly, because although they knew God initially, the thankfulness and acknowledgement of God displayed at Noah’s altar did not continue. So, it was not their vile conduct that led them to dishonouring God, but rather the dishonouring of God led to their vile conduct. So, if God is not honoured and glorified in the hearts of men and women we should not be surprised if conduct is affected accordingly. As they moved away from acknowledging God, they became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened. Man’s search for meaning and purpose will produce only meaningless conclusions and a darkened heart will produce all manner of sin.

Then as we move on from Romans 1:22 we get the awful catalogue of these sins as seen through immorality and idolatry. As we think about some of these things that were prevalent in the heathen world that had moved away from God, how sad it is that in our current, so called, Christian world many of these things are now becoming prevalent again. Are we now living in a post-Christian land?

We see those who thought they were wise and yet God calls them foolish. These are strong words indeed, and are backed up in two Psalms, Psalm 14:1 and Psalm 53:1, where King David states that *“The fool has said in his heart that there is no God.”* Let us pray that God will give us strength and confidence not to be influenced by those whom this world would class as the wise when they tell us there is no God. I am convinced, from the consideration of these verses we are looking at today, Romans 1:19-31, that the idea that there is no God is the source of every single problem that this world is faced with today. The blessing of individuals today can only come through faith in God as revealed through the glad tidings. The blessing of this whole world in a day to come will only be when God is completely vindicated, and Christ is acknowledged by all as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (See 1 Timothy 6:15).

So, in the heathen world they replaced God with idols and because of this in Romans 1:24-32 we read twice that God had given them up (Romans 1:24 and Romans 1:26) and once that God gave them over (Romans 1:26). God has given mankind the ability to choose our own way, He has not created us as robots who are under His control. He wants us to respond to Him willingly, so if we choose not to, we should not be surprised if he gives us up in judgment in the same way we are reading here. He allowed them to have their own way and the results that followed were not good. This term “gave them up” or “over” is a judicial term used in the context of a prisoner being given over to his sentence. Once the judge gives the judgment, he, in one sense, abandons them to their fate. The judge can only intervene before he passes his sentence.

There are two ways in which this judgment comes to pass. Firstly, indirectly. By removing His restraint man’s sin is allowed to run its course and come to its expected conclusion. This has an immediate effect, in the kind of life lived in this world, but secondly there is a future effect. This is a judgment that will come eventually in a day to come if sin is not repented from and the glad tidings accepted in this life.

We see in Romans 1:25 that *“they worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”* In the glad tidings that come through Christianity nothing, absolutely nothing, can ever be compared to the triune creator God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our appreciation of the creation should bring from us thankfulness and cause us to worship the Creator. The great old hymn reminds us that when we look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear and see all the wonderful things of the creation, we should be able to say

*“... my God, how great Thou art”.*

Stuart K Hine (1899-1989) © 1953 Stuart K Hine/The Stuart Hine Trust

Earlier, the hymn says however,

*“And when I think, that God His Son not sparing,  
Sent him to die I scarce can take it in...”*

Stuart K Hine (1899-1989) © 1953 Stuart K Hine/The Stuart Hine Trust

Nothing in this whole creation, however wonderful it may seem should ever be able compare with the wonder of the Creator, who is blessed for ever.

Then from idolising the creation, we get in Romans 1:26-27 the awful fact of the very order of that creation being turned on its head. Again, as we have previously done, we go back to Genesis, the seed plot of the scriptures, where we read in Genesis 1:27 *“male and female He created them”*. In Genesis 2:24 we have an unequivocal statement, *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”*. Sadly, these very things that marked the heathen, primitive world into which the Apostle Paul had gone into to bring the glad tidings are now finding themselves into the professing Christian church.

I do not feel there are too many comments I can make of such things but rather will read from the Word of God and allow Him to speak for Himself. The verses say *“For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their woman exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise, also the men, leaving the natural use of the women, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due”* (Romans 1:26-27).

It is clear then from the creation of the world that men and women are different, equal but different, and that sexual relationships are only blessed by God when they are between one woman and one man for the whole of life. Anything out with this blessed union is seen as sinful in the eyes of a holy and righteous God.

These verses, Romans 1:26-27 show us that having given up God, the barbarian, of the Apostles Paul's day, went from idolatry to sexual immorality. How sad then in our day that similar practices are prevalent in our society where the Word of God was once seen as the cornerstone of life. Five hundred years ago men and women were martyred in this country for their desire to have the Bible printed in the language of the common man and now we seem, in general, to have turned our back on it. May the Christian church be stirred up and strengthened to hold the truth of God's word and not be swayed by the common beliefs and fads of the day in which we live which will all pass, but the Word of God will endure forever.

Now into Romans 1:28 and we get this term again that *“God gave them over”*. They had given up on God in their minds and therefore God respected their decision and gave them over to the resulting judgment their actions will bring. This manifested itself in a debased mind. Interestingly, this word debased comes from a Greek word that means “not passing the test”. This was often used to describe metals that were deemed worthless and useless because they contained too many impurities. We could say then that God has tested the mind that has turned away from God and found it worthless and useless in its current state. This is of course is the very basis of the glad tidings that in our current condition we are useless and worthless in comparison to God's righteousness.

We will see in the coming weeks that Saul of Tarsus, as the Apostle Paul was known before his conversation on the Damascus Road (see Acts 9:1-9), could never have been identified with this first group of people. He was a zealous, religious Jew (see Philippians 3:4-6) and far removed from the primitive pagan or Barbarian that we are thinking of here. However, he was prepared to go anywhere and be anything in order to bring the gospel to all men (see 1 Corinthians 9:22-23). He was able and willing to go to these very people and by the preaching of the Gospel was able to turn them from this debased state of mind and bring them into the blessing of being called the children of God.

In 1 Corinthians 6:11 after he lists some of the resulting behaviours we have in Romans 1:19-32, he can say *“And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”*

Similarly, he writes to the Colossians and tells them to put off these behaviours and ways of life that marked the old order of things and that they now must put on the attributes of the new nature that they have in Christ.

In this new order of things, what they were before no longer matters, whether Jew or Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, Barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free. History tells us that the Scythians and Barbarians were amongst the most dangerous and violent people of the known world at that point, the very embodiment of all we have been

considering in Romans 1:19-32. Yet, here are some of these very people who are now part of the assembly in Colosse. What a beautiful example of the grace of God that can lift men and women from the very lowest of moral positions to being blessed in Christ.

What a contrast this is to the end of Romans 1. Romans 1:29-31 list the terrible sins that come from the debased mind that is given up by God and then rather than repent of the sins that they are very aware that they are committing, they take pleasure in other people continuing to commit them. Again, I feel this is a big challenge to us as Christians. not only should we take care to ensure we do not get entangled in the sins that this world now sees as acceptable but that we also do not align in any way to those who do in a way that may seem like we are condoning their actions.

We do, however, still need to endeavour to reach out with the gospel, the apostles did not shut themselves away in a monastery in order to keep themselves from these terrible sins but they ensured they remained “unspotted” by them “*through the washing of water by the word*”, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 5:26. Among Paul’s final words to the Philippians, he encourages them to think on things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and are worthy of praise and I believe that by keeping our minds fixed on these things we will ensure that we will be unaffected by all that that we have considered this morning.

So as we finish our consideration I trust that as we get more of an appreciation of the holiness and righteousness of God and how he hates sin in all its forms but yet at the same time loves the sinner, we will have no difficulty in acquiescing with the Divine verdict that all who have chosen to go on without God are “*without excuse*” (Romans 1:20). Thankfully however we can close with the wonderful knowledge that they are not without hope.

May God bless and encourage you all who have been listening today. This is talk 1081, entitled, “What about the Primitive Pagan?”

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