

Sermons through

# Romans

## A Universal Epiphany

*Romans 1:19*

*With Study Questions*

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# A Universal Epiphany

*Romans 1:19*

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, <sup>19</sup> because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, <sup>21</sup> because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things <sup>24</sup> Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

## Introduction

In May of 2004 a book written by J. Budziszewski' was published by Spence Publishing Company with the intriguing title: *What We Can't Not Know*. In the book Budziszewski explores the foundation of "common moral sense – basic principles known to all men" – a timely topic in a culture that seems to have lost its ethical moorings. Have you ever stopped to consider what you can't not know? This may sound obvious but I recall philosophy classes in college that succeeded in getting me to question the very fabric of my own existence. And I am not alone in this.

These types of questions have plagued philosophers for hundreds and thousands of years--pushing them to such statements, as with Rene Descartes, as "*cogito ergo sum*" "I think, therefore I am." Or more recently the 1999 blockbuster, *The Matrix*, Morpheus states: "If real is what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then 'real' is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain." Morpheus offers Neo a choice: If he takes the blue pill he wakes up in his bed and forgets about everything that happened and he can believe whatever he wants to believe. If he takes the red pill he stays in

wonderland and Morpheus will show him how deep the rabbit-hole goes (the rabbit-hole being reality) – Morpheus explains that all he’s offering is the truth, nothing more. The movie was thought provoking. How do we know the things we know? Is there something that everybody knows and can’t help knowing?

It is the universal lack of ability/willingness to answer that question that undermines meaningful dialogue. We once thought we had common ground with our neighbor, largely because both we and our neighbors were raised in an evangelized, Judeo-Christian culture. But now that that is under attack, objective, moral, authoritative guidelines for human conduct float about like hot-air balloons in a stormy gale.

When my sister was in high school in the sixties, a teacher physically shoved her boyfriend for kissing her in the hallway. Later that same decade I was given a swat for not having my shirt tucked in. Today people would view that kind of behavior on the part of high school faculty as ancient and barbaric. A couple of years ago the same high school published a yearbook extolling the virtues of homosexuality with photos of high school students illustrating the beauty of intimacy in those relationships.

We currently live in a culture that would ‘more or less’ universally dismiss the legitimacy of corporal punishment administered by a faculty member and we have embraced the notion of amorous (virtually) without restriction. All this to say, “Just what is it we think we know and is there anything we can’t not know?” We may view the examples I’m giving as somewhat innocuous (although I am not sure they are), but there are other examples of human behavior knocking at the door of our society (some are well in the room) where innocent human lives are very much at risk.

I labor the issue to bring to our attentions that mankind’s inability to find agreement in the flood of ethics, politics, sociology and morality in general is rooted in a light given to us by God that we are continually seeking to snuff out.

## **Review**

We are following a line of thought in the passage before us where the apostle is explaining why he is “eager” to “preach the gospel” (God’s promise to send a Deliverer to redeem men from their sins – vs 15). He has

explained that he is not ashamed of the gospel for it is the **“power of God to salvation for everyone who believes”** (vs 16). In the gospel sinners receive the righteousness which comes from God and this righteousness is apprehended through the instrument of faith (vs 17).

In verse 18 Paul launches into what amounts to be a great indictment against humanity. He explains that the **“wrath of God is revealed”** in the world in which we live. We tend to think of wrath as it relates to the Day of Judgment, but the Gospel of John informs us:

**He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:36).**

The wrath of God is a present reality and can be observed in darkness of human conduct—the apex of which is the rejection of truth itself as presented in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul writes of those...

**...who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved (2 Thessalonians 2:10).**

It is a refusal to love the truth and, as Paul writes in verse 18, a suppression of the truth due to unrighteousness, or, as Jesus taught:

**And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (John 3:19, 20).**

Paul now continues to explain what all men can't not know.

**...because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them (Romans 1:19).**

## A Greater Court

There is a general sentiment that God is not quite fair in judging people simply because they couldn't figure out the correct religion. Ignorance can be a very useful excuse. But that particular sentiment is not applied when it comes to other, lesser things. If a person explained that they had never reached the conclusion in their own thoughts that it was wrong to burglarize a house the judge wouldn't buy it. If a person sought to excuse himself from guilt because he didn't grasp the notion that the truth was preferable to deception there would be a corporate and justified "Give me a break!"

But it can be argued that once God is removed from the equation of human decision making, burglary and deception become ethical options. The political, military and economic leaders of the Nazi party were put on trial and convicted in 1945 at Nuremberg. One of the many criticisms of those trials was the fact that these defendants were heeding the "highest authority" before them. Ethically that is a difficult question to answer. If men choose to worship Hitler rather than Jesus the court becomes more ecclesiastical than criminal, and that adjudication will find no absolute verdict in any human court.

But there is a greater court of which Paul writes. It is a court where God presides over every human thought. It is the word of God who is "**a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart**" (Hebrews 4:12); it is God Himself who "**discerns my thoughts from afar**" (Psalm 139:2).

**I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds (Jeremiah 17:10).**

## A Universal Epiphany

And what Paul is revealing to us is that the wrath of God is on men because they suppress the truth. The truth is *gnoston tou theou* 'the knowledge of God or the knowledge that there is a God.' The knowledge of God, Paul explains is manifest in them.

**“Manifest”** *phaneron* means “being evident so as to be readily known, visible, clear, plainly to be seen, open, plain, evident, known.”<sup>1</sup> And we have this knowledge of God because **“God has shown it”** to us. The word Paul uses for **“shown it”** *ephanerosen* (which is aorist or past tense) means to cause to become visible, reveal, expose publicly. It is where we get the word ‘epiphany.’

When I would watch cartoons as a child one of the characters might have a great idea; this would be accompanied by a light going on over their head. There was a sudden realization. What we learn here is that God has granted mankind a universal epiphany. Every man knows of the true God. Paul then explains how this epiphany works.

**For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:20).**

### Clearly Seen Invisibility

The order of the words in the verse in the Greek is a little different than the order in English. Paul begins by explaining that the invisible attributes of God, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen and understood by the things that God has made. By simple illustration, when I look at a work of art I know and understand that it was produced by an artist.

Notice the words Paul uses: **“clearly seen”** *nooumena* meaning to grasp or comprehend, perceive, apprehend, understand, gain an insight into.<sup>2</sup> **“understood”** *kathoratai* meaning to look down upon from a higher place, to behold, generally and figuratively to perceive, to see or know clearly. And, more specifically, what we know clearly is the “power” and “Godhood” of God. In other words, we get it! It is a self-evident truth. It has been said that:

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<sup>1</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (1047). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (674). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world.<sup>3</sup>**

## **Known, Not Figured Out**

And I might add that it is not a matter of discursive reasoning. I don't look at the beauty of a flower or a sunset then enter into the mental exercise of drawing a final conclusion that there must have been a maker of these things. It is not something we figure out. It is something we know. It is something we can't not know.

Neither is Paul suggesting that knowledge of God's existence and power is the result of careful deduction and reasoning, so that the text can be used to encourage sophisticated rational argumentation as an apologetic for God's existence. Instead, this knowledge of God is a reality for all people, not simply for those who possess unusually logical minds. <sup>4</sup>

Calvin explains:

By saying, that *God has made it manifest*, he means, that man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and that eyes were given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author himself.<sup>5</sup>

## **No Apologetics For Man**

And if there is any doubt in terms of the certainty of this knowledge, Paul adds the words "without excuse" *anapologetous*. We read 'an' as the negative particle before this word *apologetous* we might bring out minds to

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<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (86). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

<sup>4</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (86). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:19). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

the topic of apologetics which means to give a reasoned explanation or defense for the faith. We find ourselves often in the business of defending God where Paul here writes that God has so manifested Himself to all men that they will crumble in the effort of defending themselves.

### **The Eagerness of Paul**

It must be said that the general revelation that all men have of the existence of God is not (due to men's sin) redemptive. It is only condemning. It takes away any excuse.

This brings us back to why Paul is eager to preach the gospel. It is the heralding of a good, covenant making-covenant keeping God, who has kept His promise to send a redeemer that provides man with his only hope of redemption. Information, education, innovation et al are wonderful things and should be pursued in all the various disciplines and vocations in life. But when it comes to where the greatest thinkers arrive apart from Christ, Paul writes:

**Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:20).**

No human endeavor can aid in man's deliverance but Christ alone crucified and resurrected. This universal epiphany given to all men has been willfully suppressed and dismissed and the consequences of this have been revealed throughout the world. But God is a gracious God who subdues our naturally rebellious hearts with the light of Christ. And it is with our attention toward that that we now come to the Lord's Table.

## Questions for Study

1. Have you ever questioned how you know the things you know? Is there anything you can't not know? Explain (pages 2, 3)?
2. Does man's lack of ability to explain how or why he knows things affect his ethics and guidelines for life? How (pages 3, 4)?
3. How is the wrath of God currently on all men (pages 3, 4)?
4. Is God fair in judging all men? Explain (page 5).
5. What is the universal epiphany given to all (pages 5, 6)?
6. How do all men know there is a God, even though He is invisible (pages 6, 7)?
7. Does man somehow figure out there is a God? How does your answer affect your interaction with those who do not believe (page 7)?
8. Paul teaches that man has "no excuse." What does this tell us about man's knowledge of God (pages 7, 8)?
9. Why does all this enforce Paul's eagerness to preach the gospel (page 8)?