

# **Without Excuse**

**Romans 1:18-32 by Mark Hammer**

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## INTRODUCTION

*“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17).*

For the power of the one true God is revealed by faithful obedience, a righteousness, orderly living—that points to the good news that Christ died, was buried, and rose again to new life; however, the recipients of this letter, the Jewish and the gentile Christians, were struggling with unity around this truth. These two groups wrestled with a superiority complex which caused division within the church. The Jewish Christians believed they were superior because they were God’s chosen people, to whom the law was given, and the gentile Christians believed God had rejected the Jews, since they crucified Christ, and that now they were the new favorites. **Paul is about to build his case that the ground is level at the foot of the cross**; all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He is about to reveal that all of humanity needs to chew on one big slice of humble pie, because all people are without excuse and deserve God’s wrath—His just repayment for sin.

## SUPPRESSING THE TRUTH

John Cage, one of the most famous American Composers of the 20th century, believed that the universe is impersonal by nature and that it originated only through pure chance. In an attempt to live consistently with this personal philosophy, Cage composed all of his music by various means of chance. He used, among other things, the tossing of coins and the rolling of dice to make sure that no personal element entered into the final product. The result was music that had no form, no structure, and for the most part, no appeal. Although Cage’s professional life accurately reflected his belief in a universe that had no order, his personal life did not, for his favorite pastime was mycology—the collecting of mushrooms, and because of the potentially lethal results of picking the wrong mushroom, he couldn’t approach them based on a purely “by-chance” basis. Concerning that, he stated: “I became aware that if I approached mushrooms in the spirit of ‘by-chance’ operations, I would die shortly.” John Cage “believed” one thing, but practiced another. In doing so, he is an example of the man described in Romans 1:18 who “suppresses the truth” of God, for when faced with certainty of order in the universe, he still clung to his

own novel theory.<sup>1</sup> In fact, this *is* the unrighteousness of all men everywhere. **Truth is all around us, but we try to suppress it, manipulate it, and ignore it.**

In Romans 1:18-20 Paul writes, “*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*” God’s wrath—His just repayment for mankind’s wrongdoing—is what happens when righteousness meets unrighteousness. Unrighteousness (ἀδικία *adikia*) means ungodlike. It describes the person who doesn’t care about God’s moral law and order; they have a wrong attitude inwardly, and how they live their lives reveals it, and so human ungodliness, unrighteousness, and unbelief is what brings about the wrath of God. Although, we don’t enjoy hearing about God’s wrath, and it makes us quite uncomfortable, as it should, Paul is using it to paint a dark backdrop of the grotesque and immoral impacts that sin has on all of humanity, which causes disorder, chaos, confusion, and corruption, demanding God’s just wrath, so that this dark backdrop will also be the perfect contrast to illuminate the incredible and redemptive love of God for those in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), and *that* is good news!!!

Paul begins by making it clear that nobody has an excuse for not embracing the truth of God. Truth is available to all men; they can find it, but they are suppressing it, pushing it down, and hiding it from others. It is available and evident, because, “*That which is known about God is evident to them,*” (vs. 19) or better translated, “among them.” Russel Brand, a comedian who recently was baptized into Christ, had this to say concerning the evidence of God:

“As meaning deteriorates in the modern world, as our values and institutions crumble, all of us become increasingly aware that there’s this eerily familiar awakening and beckoning figure that we’ve all known all of our lives, within us and around us....”

All people everywhere had a concept of God, or *a* god. at the time of this writing. Atheism and humanism is a relatively new belief that began during the enlightenment era of the early 1800s. Paul didn’t have atheists and humanists on his mind here. During the time of his writing, all these ancient cultures acknowledged a divine being or beings, but

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* pg. 72-74

these created divine beings, which were simply corrupted images of worship, darkened the minds of their worshippers by satisfying their worshippers desires of flesh, leading to cultures of chaos and depravity. These gods were not the one true God—creator of all things—Yahweh. Yahweh was a God of divine order and light.

## **ORDER AS EVIDENCE OF THE GOD OF ORDER**

**All men, everywhere, live in God’s divine created order, and it’s His order that points to Him as the one true God**, but men turned towards their own rational minds, darkened by their appetites of the flesh, denied truth, and now we see disorder all around us. Creation and its beautiful, god-ordained order, have always pointed to the one creator God through his invisible attributes, that is His eternal power and divine nature, on display through what’s been made (Rom.1:20). **Living in an ordered creation leaves no one with an excuse that they can’t find the God of that order, because He has given everyone the capacity to find Him through the order of creation, but because of our sinful nature our minds are darkened to that revelation.** Men are without excuse, as if God is saying, when you see righteousness, you see the real God of order, and when you see unrighteousness, marked by depravity and fleshly passions, you know a people who have suppressed truth and are under the gods of disorder. Therefore, both order and disorder are evidence of God’s truth—one proclaiming a people who are in the light and one proclaiming a people who need out of darkness.

Psalm 8 testifies to the reality of a personal, creator God—oracles revealed first to the Jew to be passed to the nations, when the Psalmist proclaims:

*O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens! 2 From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength because of Your adversaries, to make the enemy and the revengeful cease. 3 When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; 4 What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him? 5 Yet You have made him a little lower than God, And You crown him with glory and majesty! 6 You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, 7 All sheep and oxen, And also the beasts of the field, 8 The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, whatever passes through the paths of the seas. 9 O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:1-9)*

When anyone recognizes this truth, they proclaim Psalm 19:1-2: *“The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. 2 Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge.”* **It’s hard to personally see order in creation and to have an excuse that there is no personal creator who ordered it all!**

Maybe the greatest creation which testifies to the glory of God is humanity itself, which takes on the very image of God (Genesis 1:27). As imagers, humanity is hard-wired to the Creator, for this reason we can’t escape transcendent thoughts of morality, truth, recognition of beauty, the desire for purpose, a sense of immortality, or acknowledgement of order versus disorder. These thoughts are outside of physical human reasoning in themselves, therefore we can’t escape from the reality of a transcendent God from which these thoughts ultimately come, but we are forced to either ignore, deny, or accept that this God exists.

**God has revealed himself to all of humanity throughout all times of history. Knowing that each person is made in the very image of God, every breath they breathe testifies to the breath of God. Every heart that beats testifies to God’s heart for them.** All they see, hear, taste, and touch points to creation—making them wrestle with the ultimate question, “From where has all this come? There must be one true God of all!” On judgment day, those who suppressed the truth of their Creator, evident by their unrighteous living, will be defenseless. For all are without excuse! Furthermore, on this side of the cross and tomb, all the attributes of God are most clearly seen in the person of God—Christ, who is revealed now by His bride, the Church (Eph. 1:22-23; 3:8-10)!

## **FOOLISH OF MEN**

Paul continues in verse 21: *For even though they KNEW God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures* (Rom. 1:21-23). Although they knew the truth about God, they didn’t show it, but instead became vain in their speculations—an inward self-reasoning (διαλογισμός dialogismós), and they suppressed it by talking themselves out of truth and into darkness masked as light. This type of self-reasoning has

the potential for many to abandon and run from the truth of an all-creating God of order and replace it with foolish talk such as this from theoretical physicist and cosmologist, Lawrence Krauss:

*The amazing thing is that every atom in your body came from a star that exploded. And, the atoms in your left hand probably came from a different star than your right hand. It really is the most poetic thing I know about physics: You are all stardust. You couldn't be here if stars had not exploded, because the elements - the carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, iron, all the things that matter for evolution - weren't created at the beginning of time. They were created in the nuclear furnaces of stars, and the only way they could get into your body is if those stars were kind enough to explode. So, forget Jesus. The stars died so that you could be here today.<sup>2</sup>*

I would politely respond: “Excuse me Mr. Krauss, but my Jesus is the one who breathed those stars into existence” (Ps. 33:6; Jn 1:1-3).

**As if to trade in the juiciest new york steak for the driest canned spam, our sinful hearts are inclined to trade in the glory of a perfect creator for an imperfect creation.** If the Jews thought Paul was only focusing on the gentiles prior to this, there was no doubt that Paul wasn't allowing them to separate themselves from the same transgression. It's as though he's saying to the Jewish audience, “If these gentiles are without excuse, you guys, who were entrusted in proclaiming the oracles of God to the nations, are *definitely* without excuse, as God divinely revealed himself to you!” as this passage about exchanging the glory of God for vain and worthless idols can be found in the Old Testament narrative, specifically of the Israelites in the wilderness. The Psalmist describes this pattern in Psalm 106:13-21:

*They quickly forgot His works; They did not wait for His counsel, 14 but craved intensely in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. 15 So HE GAVE THEM THEIR REQUEST, but sent a wasting disease among them. 16 When they became envious of Moses in the camp, and of Aaron, the holy one of the Lord, 17 The earth opened and swallowed up Dathan, and engulfed the company of Abiram. 18 And a fire blazed up in their company; the flame consumed the wicked. 19 They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a molten image. 20 Thus they EXCHANGED THEIR*

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing*

*GLORY for the image of an ox that eats grass. 21 They forgot God their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt....*

This exchange of the glory of God for a corruptible image is a problem for both Jew and Greek. All have fallen short of the glory of God and are in need of a redeemer (Rom. 3:9-18, 23-24). “Instead of worshiping the creator of you, and I, we’ve all said, ‘Screw you, God! I’ll take your stuff, but you can die!’ But that trade is terrible—trading God for man. It’s like God offers us water, and we say, ‘But God this is such good sand.’”<sup>3</sup>

**To exchange the glory of God for a created image is a problem for all of humanity, and it’s the first step in attempting to deify oneself—becoming like a god, but in doing so one must also downgrade and degrade their very concept of the true God, which is what a fool does.** The fool has said in his heart, “*There is no God*” (Psalm 14:1). “*The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, ‘There is no God’*” (Ps 10:4). Our wicked and foolish hearts are not wired to draw near to God, but to run from Him and become our own. Our hearts desire isn’t to make His name great, but to make our own name great. **Left to our own ways, we’ll believe the lie that greater satisfaction and power isn’t found in the Creator but in creation itself.** This is why we chase after so many created things, hoping those things will create in us something better than our Creator, and yet all we find is brokenness that eventually will blind us in our pursuit! For this reason, we entertain sinful thoughts and we deliberate within ourselves a justification for sinning, in the end believing the lie—“I know better than God”—or that somehow rebellion will actually bring a greater sense of salvation more than following God’s orderly ways and finding true liberation.

## **AN INCONSPICUOUS EVIDENCE OF GRACE**

When a person gets caught up in sin, it blinds them from seeing God in the truest light. The more a person’s mind is warped by darkness, the more they wander farther into darkness. Sin is nothing to play around with!

*Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. 25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 1:24-25).*

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<sup>3</sup> Jefferson Bethke, Spoken word: “Counterfeit Gods” on youtube

This passage seems to indicate that if one willingly chooses to ignore truth, God, being just, will let him walk in ignorance, so as to reveal to the person they've willfully suppressed the truth and are under God's wrath—His curse, but to the one who gives himself to a blessed God, they shall be blessed forever!

For the person who runs from their creator in an attempt to find their glory in corruptible creation, they become what they worship. If you bow at the altar of the corruptible, your life reflects corruption. It's written in Psalm 135:15-18:

*The idols of the nations are but silver and gold, The work of man's hands. 16 They have mouths, but they do not speak; They have eyes, but they do not see; 17 They have ears, but they do not hear, nor is there any breath at all in their mouths. 18 Those who make them will be like them, Yes, everyone who trusts in them.*

**When one worships vain and worthless objects in an attempt to deify themselves, in their denial of God they actually dehumanize themselves, falling into the most grotesque passions and lusts that are more animalistic than human.**

*For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. (Rom. 1:26-27).*

**When a person becomes an idol hoarder, their life shouts to the world *this person is out of order*.** Idolatry—giving yourself over to any created thing in order to add value to your life, eventually leads to the wrath of God, and the evidence of being under his wrath is gross immorality—living out degrading passions of the flesh. Paul is showing the gentiles and Jews what happens when one gives themselves over to their sinful lusts and desires, and God allows them to act out their wickedness in the most shameful and dishonorable ways. The Apostle uses homosexuality here as a prime example of shameful lusts gone unhinged, as it's a blatant disregard for the natural order of things, and the final example of a broken down order. He is describing homosexual acts and practices here, *not* homosexual inclinations or conditions as a result of the fall. For it's the person who acts upon the tendencies and inclinations that is found guilty of sin. **For sin, in its most egregious ways, always destroys life, disrupts God's created order, and confuses**



**categories, which is one divine S.O.S signal in the dark seas of humanity.** Whether humanity in the dark sees the signal or not, we can only hope and pray that the light of the faithful might expose those dark seas, in such a way that the ships no longer tarry in the waves but are led to still calm waters.

Paul continues by writing in Romans 1:28,

*And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 32 and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:28-32).*

For the deeds of darkness are an inconspicuous marker of grace from God, so His faithful can call those out of darkness into the light. As much as we would love to think of others when it comes to this list of dark deeds above, if we humble ourselves as a people, we'll find that all of us, at one time, have had our hand in the cookie jar. We have all been "guilty as charged!" However, there is hope for all! For this very reason the gospel must continue to go forth to all who are under his wrath. The rebel is given over to his futile passions and desires, in hopes that in his despair he might recognize the saving grace of God when a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called people out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

## **CONCLUSION**

As the preacher once preached, in his sermon: "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God."

*How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be. . . . And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and*

*stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming from the east, west, north, and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing! To see so many rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit! How can you rest one moment in such a condition? . . . Therefore, let everyone that is [outside] of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come....<sup>4</sup>*

*Wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10). **God gives us life as a gift to repent. It's faith unto salvation! Therefore, as long as it is today, embrace the open door of Salvation in Christ and look for the lost sinner in peril.***

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God*, July 8, 1741