

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 1:18-22

In 1961, Robert Jastrow became the founding director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies. He served in that capacity until his retirement from NASA in 1981.

Jastrow, an astrophysicist, originally was an agnostic, who believed in the existence of God, but did not believe that God had been active in creation. Eventually that changed. Jastrow became a strong proponent of creationism.

Here is some of what he wrote:

“Now we see how the astronomical evidence supports the biblical view of the origin of the world. The essential elements in the astronomical and biblical accounts of Genesis are the same. It wasn't evolution at all. [The Evidence] asks what cause produced this effect? Who or what put the matter or energy into the universe? And science cannot answer.”

Jastrow went on to write,

“For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance. He is about to conquer the highest peak, and as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who've been there for centuries.”

To my way of thinking, Jastrow is echoing what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 1. As part of his explanation as to why all humans are fallen and why all are deemed guilty Paul lays out an intricate and detailed theology to help us see these things.

I'd like to get you to listen with your ears and your hearts today. I'd like to remind you of the God-origin of Paul's manuscript. As it is written in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..."

Or as 2 Peter 1:21 reminds us, "For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

So what Paul tells us in this chapter is not, as I am fond of saying, human originated. (Originated isn't in the dictionary . . . I started using that word decades ago). What Paul tells us is the Spirit's perspective – so we ought to give it all the more attention.

In the latter part of verse 18, following into verse 19 Paul tells us what God's primary issue with humanity – all humanity – is. He describes them universally as, "men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them."

There it is; there is God's number one problem with universal humanity: "They suppress the truth by their wickedness." What truth? That's what follows in the next few verses. To put it succinctly – God's existence and the universal proofs of His existence offered in creation.

Paul expands this argument in verse 20 when he writes, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

The key to this passage is one word in verse 18; it's the word "suppress". Paul says humans in their godlessness have "suppressed" the truth of God's existence.

That's their number one sin; that is their number one rebellion. They have knowingly "suppressed" the truth of God's existence that is readily evident through general revelation – that is creation.

The original humans did not have a merely intellectual knowledge of God. No, my friends, they had something much greater than even what you and I have. Our first parents had a personal, experiential, physical knowledge of God.

Let that soak in for a moment. Adam and Eve – and I believe their first sons as well – had a personal, experiential, physical knowledge of God. In the Garden of Eden he had walked with our first parents in the cool of the day.

He had taken on a form they could recognize. He had conversed with them – giving them both the promises of obedience and the warning of rebellion.

He had invited them to multiply, fill the earth, and dominate creation. He had also warned them that the day they rebelled and ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they would die.

I don't know if you have read this, or grasped the deadly seriousness of it, but the book of Genesis tells us that Adam's family eventually split off into two spiritual lines. One line remained godly, while the other became increasingly disenfranchised from God.

In Genesis 5 we learn that eventually there were 2 men named Enoch. One was from Cain's family line, the other from Seth's. There were also 2 men given the name Lamech.

The seventh man from Adam was named Enoch. He was a descendent of Seth. He's the one who walked with God and was translated or "raptured" to heaven. His name, by the way, means "teaching".

Hebrew tradition tells us that Adam, Seth, and Enoch chose 12 constellations and named them in such a way that as they lay under the stars at night fathers could teach their children about God's plan for redeeming them from the curse.

Now stay with this. Looking at Cain's line, we find the 7th man from Adam was Lamech. Lamech, was a confessed murderer and the first polygamist.

Lamech's name, by the way, means "despairing". His children introduced a worldly-based civilization focused on the denial of God and the elevation of man. Lamech's goal was for humans to redeem themselves through their own achievements.

Lamech's people are credited with ancient animal husbandry, manufacturing, the arts, music, and entertainment.

All of this is what led to Noah's flood. All of this led to the point where God noted that "every thought of every human was only evil, continually."

Now here's my point. Biblically speaking ... this is the first time we see an entire race of humans who have done exactly what Paul says in our text. They had "suppressed the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them."

Now here's first point. The first reason for the wrath of God is revelation. Men were given the truth of God. Men were given the truth of God.

After the flood, the process began again. Noah's family line split – just as Adam's had. Once again, humans denied the existence of God – intentionally.

The truth is, according to Paul, they knew better. The Philistines knew the truth of God. The Canaanites, knew the truth of God. The Egyptians knew the truth of God. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plains, knew the truth of God. All men know the truth of God.

The great theologian Augustus Strong wrote, “God has inlaid the evidence of the fundamental truth in the very nature of man so that no where is he without a witness.”

All of this, of course, refers to what we call “natural revelation.” In other words, what can be known about God from nature or creation.

In theology, we have another term: special revelation. That refers to any point in which God reveals himself to man directly. Two examples would be the Scriptures and the specific revelation of God through Jesus Christ. That’s why Hebrews 1:1-3 says to us:

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”

Even ancient Israel not only rejected natural revelation, but special revelation. Israel rejected creation as the evidence of God; they even rejected the Scriptures.

As Paul writes this chapter his primary focus is the Gentile world. And even though they did not have the special revelation of the Jews – Paul says they are still guilty of suppressing the truth by wickedness – because “what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”

So God has revealed himself. He’s done it through “natural revelation”

– what can be known with our natural senses. But there is also another world – the one that is invisible to our natural eyes, ears, and touch.

That's what Roger Biebrich is going to tell us about in what is known as "Irreducible Complexity".