

When Everyone Knows God

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to the main body of Paul's letter to the Romans. After the introduction (Verses 1-17), the first subject that is brought before us in this letter about the Christian faith is the true condition of man – what he is really like. In the book of Genesis, the first question that God ever asked man was a very revealing one. He came into the garden in the cool of the evening, after Adam and Eve has sinned, and his first question was, "Man, where are you?"

During a recent class taught by Dick Halver-son, I was struck by his treatment of this question. He pointed out that this is the question that God is always asking man: "Where are you?" Until you answer that question, there is nothing further that God can tell you about himself or about you. Dick illustrated it this way:

He said to the hostess of the class, "Suppose somebody had called before the class began, and said that they were trying to find the place, but were lost. What would be the first question you would ask them?" Well, of course, it would be, "Where are you?"

Until that question is answered, it is impossible to give directions for how to get anywhere. It is necessary to know where you are if anyone is going to help you. It doesn't do any good to ask for directions unless you know the answer to that question. If you think that you are someplace, but you are not, or if you think that you are in one location and are actually in another, then the directions that are given to you can only confuse you – they won't help a bit.

So, you can see it is true that the first thing man must answer is the question God asks, "Where are you?" That is where Paul begins the body of

this letter to the Romans. Where are you? Where are we? It is an interesting answer that we find.

The first thing Paul shows us is **man's opportunity** – the possibilities that we all have had to know God. This is a most interesting realm because it is the very question that is usually asked when you sit down to talk to somebody about Christ or about God. Inevitably, sooner or later, the question comes up: "Well, what about the heathens who have never heard the gospel?"

In Verses 18-20, we have the answer to that question:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; {Rom 1:18-20 RSV}

This is the answer that Paul gives to the question: "What about the heathens who have never heard?" His answer is that they are without excuse. Why? Because they have heard! They may not have heard the story of Jesus as we have it recorded in the Scriptures (what we might call high school or college level revelation about God), but they have knowledge about God.

I am often distressed when I hear missionaries – in an eagerness to wake people up to the need to obey the Lord to carry the good news of Christ out to the far corners of the earth – mistakenly leave us with the impression that men out there in foreign,

pagan lands are living in utter, total darkness about God. We are sometimes told that they have no opportunity to know God at all unless we go out with the gospel; they will perish in their sins without a chance unless Christians are faithful in the preaching of the Word. Now, I understand the zeal that prompts this, and I am in full sympathy with the need to go out to these lands and proclaim the gospel of Christ – but not for the reason that they give. It isn't because men are perishing without a chance. No one dies without a chance to know God. This is what Paul is declaring so forcefully here.

He says that there has been a universal revelation of God which has reached everyone, everywhere, in every age and time. No one has ever lived without the knowledge of God, for what can be known about God is plain to them, for God has shown it to them. God took the initial responsibility to let men know what he is like. God has shown himself to them. How has he done this? Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made (i.e., in nature) so they are without excuse.

This is just a brief reference, but it is sufficient to show us that no man dies in total darkness – without the knowledge of God. The revelation is universal. Consider the beautiful words of Psalm 19:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there theme words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
{Psa 19:1-4a RSV}

Who lives who has not had a knowledge and understanding of God? It is written in nature, and in man himself, who is part of nature.

I was very interested some years ago in reading the story of Helen Keller, that remarkable woman who, as an infant, lost her sight, and her hearing, and her ability to speak. You know the story of how Miss Sullivan, in a most dedicated ministry of

love, reached through the darkness and silence to the soul of that dear girl and brought her into the knowledge of man and the earth and all that man knows. Thus, Helen Keller became one of the greatest women of modern times. She recorded that there came a time when Miss Sullivan, being a very godly woman and a wonderful Christian, wanted to impart to her some truth about God. So Miss Sullivan went to Dr. Philip Brooks and asked him to come and tell Miss Keller about God. As Dr. Brooks sat there, he talked to Miss Sullivan, and she translated the words to Helen Keller through the finger pressures that she used for communication. As she got across the idea about God, suddenly a light broke out on Miss Keller's face, and she answered back in her way, "Oh, I know Him. I've known Him a long, long time."

I think this is a wonderful confirmation that – even in the heart of someone who has no eyes to see, nor ears to hear – there is a written revelation of God in the human heart. And, if we but listen to this revelation, there is much knowledge about God that we can know.

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews we are told something about man's approach to God. We read there that it is impossible to please God without faith: "For he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him," {Heb 11:6 KJV}. We might call this the basic minimum of what it takes to know God. You must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. That is, we must believe in the existence of God and in the personality of God – that he is an intelligent being who responds to the seeking of man.

Now, this is exactly what nature proves, isn't it? All of us have had some sample, some contact, some encounter with the power of nature – we are awed by the mighty thundering of a storm that breaks upon our heads suddenly, or by the power of breakers dashing upon the shore. In some way, we find demonstrated to us the power of nature. God is a God of power, and that power indicates to us a force behind nature. Nature is alive with power. We are told that everything is in motion – the atoms that constitute this pulpit are constantly in motion. And behind the motion is the pulsating force of energy. Nature is one great mass of energy. It bespeaks, therefore, of mighty power that tells us of the existence of God.

But, more than that, all of us have experienced some knowledge of the sovereignty of God in nature. We don't play around with the laws of nature. Have you noticed that? When we discover a natural law, we are careful to observe it because, oftentimes, our very lives are at stake.

- You don't go fooling around with the law of gravity. You don't get on top of a 15-story building and shove your hands in your pockets and nonchalantly stroll over the ledge to show people how superior you are to the law of gravity. You won't break the law of gravity – you'll just illustrate it. They'll just scoop you off the pavement!
- We don't play around with the laws of electricity. When a wire is charged with 10,000 volts, we know that it will operate according to a strict and precise law, and we are careful to observe that law because one little mistake is enough to cause us to forfeit our life.

Nature is sovereign. It has the right to do what it was made to do, and in that we see the sovereignty of God – his right to be God, his right to choose, and his right to set up nature according to his idea, not ours. This, if acted upon, is the minimum basis man needs to know God – and every man knows this. This is what Hebrews 11:6 says. But I stress the words if acted upon. It is not enough just to know about God's sovereignty: It must govern us. It must control us. It must do something to us.

I was down in Southern California yesterday. To come home, I bought an airline ticket. The folder that the airline puts out doesn't read this way, but, in essence, it says, "To board a plane, one must pay the fare and hold a ticket" – and there is no getting aboard without it. So I complied with the rules and bought a ticket and had all that it took, potentially, to fly from Los Angeles to San Francisco. But, unless I acted upon that potential, it was of no value at all. I could have stuck the ticket in my pocket and walked around and said to myself all day long, "Well, I've got what it takes to get to San Francisco." But unless I went down to the airport, and handed in my ticket, and got aboard the plane, I never would have gotten here.

You see, it is simply not enough for a man to know that there is a God, and that he is a God of

sovereign being to be worshipped. We must act upon that fact. Without faith, which is a living, active thing, it is impossible to please God.

We read of **man's attitude** toward the revelation of God and the opportunity that he has in Verses 21-23:

for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and the senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. {Rom 1:21-23 RSV}

I believe that there is a time in every person's life – whether he is raised in a civilized country or in primitive society – when, in the dawning of his consciousness of the world and life around him, there is a knowledge that there is a God and that he is a God to be worshipped, a God of sovereign power. Then, each person is confronted with the choice to worship the God that he knows exists, or, under the pressure of his tribal customs, perhaps, or of the circumstances in which he lives, to be faithless to that knowledge that he has, and yield to the pressures, and turn away from God. This is the record that Paul gives. He says that men everywhere in the heathen world do not honor God as God, or give thanks to him.

That is a simple thing that God asks, isn't it.

There are three charges that Paul lays against these people:

1. First, **they did not give thanks**. Now, isn't that simple? If a lady walked across this platform, or across the auditorium, and she accidentally dropped her handkerchief, and someone picked it up and handed it to her, she would think herself most rude and boorish if she didn't say "thank you" for a simple little thing like that. And yet, God can supply everything that we need to live and breathe and have our being, and all the food and all that it takes to sustain physical life – and, more than that, all that for which our souls hunger and thirst – and many of us never take time to say a simple "thank you."

I think this is revealed often in the matter of just saying grace before meals.

Some of us who heard Doug Coe tell of his experience with the Teamsters Union will never forget the story of Herman, that dull, slow, dull-witted fellow who was used of God to open up a door of witness to Jimmy Hoffa and the leaders of the Teamsters Union: Doug told about a dinner they set up in a nightclub where all the leaders were to be. Doug was invited by Herman to come and lead in a prayer of thanks at the beginning of the meeting. Doug came into the nightclub and it was all dark, as it always is in those places. A combo was over in the corner beating out some hot jazz, and everybody was gathering around the tables. As soon as they sat down, they started to eat. Herman came over to him, and said, "It is time now for you to give the blessing." Doug said, "How are you going to do this? Everybody is eating. I don't know how you are going to stop this now." "Well," Herman said, "don't worry, I'll take care of it." He walked up to the microphone, scratched it to see if it was alive, and said, "Ha, ha! So you thought you were going to get by without praying, didn't you?" And everybody stopped with their forks halfway to their mouths, and turned around. Then Herman introduced Doug Coe, who led them in prayer. But it was a most unusual thing: That simple little act of thankfulness marks man's gratitude to God. They had not given thanks.

2. The second charge Paul makes is that these people **claim to be wise**. One of the most interesting things about men and women who reject Jesus Christ is that, almost invariably, the rejection of Jesus Christ is done in the name of education or progress. Isn't that remarkable? This is why our institutions of higher learning so frequently seem to be against the things of God. In claiming to be wise, they became foolish.
3. Then, the third charge Paul makes is that they "**exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images** resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles." Think of that! They take the glory of the immortal, incorruptible God, and make an image of it.

Do you remember what you did when you were in school and you wanted to insult the teacher? You drew an image of her on the wall

– a fearsome, gruesome caricature – and you wrote under it, "Teacher." Everyone who saw it knew you were expressing your contempt for teacher – you were insulting him or her.

When we want to express our utter contempt for some leader, what do we do? We hang him in effigy. We make an image of him and hang it up to show how contemptible he is and how contemptuous we feel toward him.

This is what man does with God. He makes an idol, and he calls it his God. He is insulting God; he is saying, "This is what I think God is like, God is a creature that I can handle, or ignore, or become indifferent to, or come and beg some favors from." This is why so many, many people have rejected Christianity – they have a caricature of God in their minds and they have rejected it as unworthy. Oh, they show some religious consideration for it, out of fear, or, perhaps, out of pressure; but, actually, they have insulted God by this type of thing.

Now, this is man's attitude. In the remaining verses of this Scripture, we see what inevitably follows this mental attitude.

Man's destiny is given in Verses 24-32:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameful acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobe-

dient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them. {Rom 1:24-32 RSV}

This is a fearsome passage, isn't it?

And yet, every one of these things is written on the pages of our newspapers every day. Just take a large metropolitan daily, and go through it, and check off the list, and you will find you can check all these things off every time.

And three times in this passage, Paul says, "God gave them up, ... God gave them up, ... God gave them up." To me, this is the most frightening thing about God. It is not the fact that he promises vengeance, or wrath – but, rather, it is that the nature of that wrath is that he lets me go ahead with what I want to do. He lets me choose wrong!

I find this bothers a lot of people. In our Home Bible Classes, people are always saying:

Well, why doesn't God stop men from doing those things? Why does he make us this way? Why does he let us make wrong choices? Why didn't he kill Hitler (or Krushchev) and eliminate this scourge from the earth?

Well, I think we are going a little too far afield when we ask the question that way. We should ask it this way:

Why didn't he stop you yesterday when you told that lie that deceived someone else? Why didn't he kill you in your tracks before you slandered that person that you gossiped about over the phone? Why didn't he stop you by cutting off your hands in a thunderbolt of judgment before you cheated on your income tax report last week?

If God is going to stop evil, why shouldn't he stop it there? And if he did, there isn't one who wouldn't be crying out against God, and saying, "You are unfair. You give us no liberty!" This merely reveals to us the unreasonableness of the human heart.

There is progression evident throughout this: You will notice that the first thing to which God gave them up was bodily defilement – they dishonored their own bodies among themselves. Then, he gave them up to dishonorable passions – that is,

their emotional lives. Then, as a final step, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, or base mind, as we read here – their mental lives, their wills are involved in this.

- If you will think back in your own experience, you will recognize that this is always the order in which evil moves in your life. Do you remember the first time you were tempted to do some obviously wrong thing – the first time you wanted to smoke, or to drink, or to experience sex, or whatever it was? It inevitably comes as a temptation for a new physical experience. You want to see how it tastes, or feels, or what it sounds like, or you want to see it. It always makes its appeal to the physical life.

The advertisers have discovered this. That is why we are always hearing, "Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should." The advertisers are making their appeal to the young boy who wants a new experience of taste in his life.

- When we yield to these temptations, we don't often really enjoy them – very seldom do we. We get the sensation, but we don't like it. But we persist, and it moves to the second state, where we really begin to enjoy it – our emotions become involved – we like it. We like the feel of it. We like the taste of it. We like the sensation that we are enjoying. And this is where Scripture is so accurate when it speaks of the pleasures of sin. Of course, sin has its pleasures – nobody would do these things if they weren't pleasurable.
- That, at last, moves us into the third, and terrible, state – when we deliberately and willfully choose to do these things, even though we already have begun experiencing what it describes here: "receiving in their own persons the penalty for their error." We deliberately choose sin. It becomes a status symbol with us. It is a mark of our independence. We fight for these things.

This explains why any movement for reform is always met with the bitterest opposition. It is not because these things have become so evil in themselves, but because they have become status marks

– marks of independence and man’s right to rule his own life. And yet, as we know, these kinds of things give us decreasing pleasure. They demand more and more in order to get less and less, until eventually it takes everything in order to get nothing.

Now, what is **God’s attitude** toward all this? This is the amazing thing. This passage closes with these words in Verse 32: “Though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.” If we were to stop right here, we would say that God’s attitude is one ending in wrath and hatred against these people. This is why so many people have the idea that God is just sitting up there as the judge, ready to cut off their heads if they get near him, because of the follies they have perpetrated. But you have read only half the letter in this case, because, as we read on, the amazing revelation in this letter is that these people who have insulted and offended and blasphemed God by their actions, who have refused his grace, and, in utter thanklessness, have wasted their lives that he is giving them – these very people are the ones whom God loved and whom Christ came to die for.

I read recently of a young man – a modern prodigal son – who had left home and then came back home after his father died. He was very kindly received by his mother. The day came for the reading of the father’s will, and the family gathered, and the lawyer began to read the document. To the surprise of all who were present, the will told in detail all the wayward career of the prodigal son. As the boy sat and listened to the account of his evil, he arose in anger and left the house. Nobody heard from him for about three years. When, eventually, they found him, he was told that the will, after telling of his waywardness, had gone on to bequeath him \$15,000.

This illustrates the way that men and women read the Bible today. They read this opening chapter of Romans, they read of this terrible condemnation, and they know how true it is. They know the guilt in their own lives – there isn’t one of us who hasn’t participated to some degree in some of these things which Romans mentions – then they stop there. Or, in anger, they get up in a huff and slam their Bibles shut, and say, “I don’t want to have anything to do with a God like that!”

But, if they read on, they discover that the whole purpose of this is simply to show them the love of God set against the dark background of human rebellion, for it is for this kind of people that Jesus Christ came. It was for them that he gave his life. It was for them that he poured himself out in death, that they might have restoration and harmony and be brought back into fellowship with God. For, of these very selfsame people that Paul describes here, it is written, “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” {Rom 5:8b KJV}.

This is the proof of God’s amazing love.

Prayer:

Our Father, we are moved as we see how intimately and clearly you know our human hearts and how foolish we are to try to hide anything from you. We know, Lord, that we must stand in the box and bow our heads in consciousness of guilt as we hear this terrible condemnation read against us. Many of us have not done many of these things, but we know that our hearts are capable of all of them. Lord, forgive us. We thank you for the forgiveness that is in Jesus Christ. We pray that if there is anyone who has never received this forgiveness, he might receive Jesus Christ as Lord now, and know the joy of cleansing and full forgiveness. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

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