

Lesson 19 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 1:20

Romans 1:20 — For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Verse 20 answers all of our remaining questions about verse 19. What specifically had been shown to them about God? And how had it been shown to them? And what made it all so plain? And why did Paul say this here? Verse 20 answers all of those questions.

Let's start with that last question — why did Paul say this here? The last sentence in verse 20 answers that question: “so they are without excuse.” Paul said all of this because he was responding to an anticipated excuse! Even before he heard their excuse, Paul knew what their excuse would be.

And what was that excuse? It was a common one — I didn't know! “I didn't know the homework was due today!” “Your honor, I didn't know armed robbery was a crime!” But, as they teach you in law school, ignorance of the law is no excuse, except when it is. Here it is not — but why not?

Remember, Paul is talking to the Gentiles. If he were talking to the Jews, Paul could just have pointed them to chapter and verse as an explanation for what they should all have already known about God — but Paul cannot point the Gentiles to chapter and verse because the Gentiles had not been given the old law. The Gentiles did not have the Old Testament.

And so, I suspect after hearing what Paul said about those who suppressed the truth in verse 18, most Gentiles would have responded, “what truth?” “Paul, we didn’t know any truth about God until you told us about him. What truth have we been suppressing?”

And, on the surface, that excuse sounds like a pretty good one. How can I suppress something I don’t know? How can I twist or distort something I have never been told?

But, as with most excuses, that excuse is not a good excuse. In fact, that excuse is not an excuse at all. That is what Paul tells us in verse 20 — “So they are without excuse.”

But why is that excuse not any good? That is what the beginning of verse 20 tells us.

“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”

And so why then are they without excuse? Simple. They are without excuse because they each have a brain, they each have five senses, and they each live on planet earth. That’s why.

They might claim that they had never been told anything about God, but that would be a lie. Everyone on earth has been told something about God — everyone. Listen to the Psalmist:

Psalm 19:1-2 — The heavens **declare** the glory of God, and the sky above **proclaims** his handiwork. Day to day **pours out speech**, and night to night **reveals knowledge**.

The heavens declare. The sky above proclaims. They pour out speech. They reveal knowledge. Everyone on earth has repeatedly been told truth about God — everyone.

But what have they been told? In Psalm 19:1, they are told about the glory of God and the handiwork of God. In Romans 1:20, they are told about the eternal power of God and the divine nature of God.

And note that Paul describes those attributes as **invisible**. How can we clearly perceive something that is invisible? Simple — we can see the effect of those invisible attributes.

When the hurricane comes on shore, we can't see the wind — but we can clearly perceive the wind from that which we can see. Likewise, with these attributes of God, we can't see them, but we can clearly perceive them from that which we can see. And, as with the clear evidence for those invisible hurricane force winds, there is likewise clear evidence for these invisible attributes of God.

We look at what we can see, and then we use our mind given to us by God to look beyond what we can see. We don't stop when we see the physical universe, but we go a step further and ask who is behind this physical universe. God expects everyone to do that. And God tells us that there is no excuse for failing to do that.

When we see something that has been created, we know there must be a creator. I think we all understand that when it comes to the things we use every day.

When I look at a camera, I know that someone designed that camera. But what about the eyeball that I use to look at that camera? What about that eye that is infinitely more complex than that camera? Am

I to think that the camera has a designer but my eyeball came together through random collisions of atoms? Does that make any sense?

Hebrews 3:4 — For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.

Isn't that verse just another way of saying that it is the fool who says in his heart that there is no God (Psalm 14:1)?

Every house is built by someone — I think we all know that. What God is saying here in verse 20 is that we should also all know the next logical step: “the builder of all things is God.” We can see what is visible, and, having done that, we should also see what is not visible. The **visible** attributes of creation are telling us something about the **invisible** attributes of God.

But what? What can we learn about God from his creation? Paul mentions two things here: “his eternal power and divine nature.”

The Greek word translated “eternal” means “always.” One commentary describes the word as meaning “always-ness.” This is not a power that comes and goes — this is a power that is always there. This is not just the power that created the universe, but this is also the power that sustains the universe. This is the power by which “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

The phrase “divine nature” emphasizes the majesty and the greatness of God. And so what Paul is saying here is that the creation proclaims the power of God and the majesty of God.

To see how that works, let's consider an example. Let's look at a portion of God's creation that very clearly shows both of those two invisible

ble attributes of God — the power of God and the majesty of God. Let's consider the stars!

It has been noted that one of the proofs that the Bible is not the work of man is the frequent occurrence of understatements in the Bible. Very often, the Bible describes in just a few words something that man would, no doubt, describe with many words. We saw an example of that when we studied Daniel 5, where the Bible uses only a few words to report one of the most significant events in world history. We also saw that in our study of Ezra 8:32 with the very brief account of the exiles' trip back to Jerusalem.

But what is the greatest understatement in the Bible? In my opinion, the greatest understatement in the Bible is found on the first page of the Bible.

Genesis 1:16 — And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—**and the stars.**

“And the stars.” That phrase is added almost like an afterthought! God created the sun and the moon, and, oh yes, God also created the stars. I almost forgot to mention that one!

God created one Sun and one moon, but how many stars did God create? How many stars are out there?

The current estimate for the total number of **galaxies** that we can see with our telescopes is 2 trillion. That is not 2 trillion stars — that is 2 trillion galaxies, of which our Milky Way galaxy is just a single example. We can see about 2 trillion galaxies.

If we assume that each of those galaxies has, on average, 100 billion stars, then the count of all the stars that we can see with our telescopes is the number shown at the top of the Handout for Lesson 19 — which is 200 sextillion, or 2 followed by 23 zeros. We can see 200 sextillion stars!

And Genesis 1:16 tells us that God created every single one of them. But, more than that, God gave a name to every single one of them! There is nothing random about the creation of the stars.

Psalm 147:4 — He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.

But just how big is 200 sextillion? How many stars is that? Let's answer that question with a comparison found in another Bible verse.

Genesis 22:17 — I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.

How does 200 sextillion stars compare with the number of grains of sand on the seashore? Which is larger?

Well, how many grains of sand are there on all the seashores of the world? That number is not very hard to estimate. We can start by counting the grains in a cubic foot of sand, and then we can estimate the cubic feet of sand per mile of shoreline, and then we can estimate the total miles of shoreline. If we do all of that, which number do you think turns out to be bigger? The count of all the stars in the visible universe, or the count of all the grains of sand on every seashore on earth?

The answer is the stars! And by four orders of magnitude!

The number of stars is 10,000 times greater than the number of grains of sand on all the seashores of earth! If you pick up a single grain of sand off the beach, there are 10,000 stars for that one grain of sand. And that is true for every grain of sand on every shoreline on earth! That is how big 200 sextillion is!

And the more we look, the more the heavens proclaim the glory of God. That was true when man first looked up at the stars, and that is still true today.

For years we have heard astronomers confidently tell us all about what they call the Big Bang and what they say is the resulting evolution of our universe over billions of years. And they all seemed so certain — until suddenly they weren't.

They very recently started looking through a new telescope: the James Webb Space Telescope, which is shown on the Handout for Lesson 19. And, yes, it looks small on the Handout, but in reality it is about the size of a five-story building sitting on a tennis court.

And what are they seeing through that giant telescope? You can see four examples of what they can see at the top of the Handout.

When we see the light from a distant galaxy through a telescope, we are not seeing that galaxy as it is now, but instead we are seeing that galaxy as it was when that light left it many years ago. And so, astronomers tell us that the photos on the Handout show us the very early days of the universe.

As for what the Bible has to say about their theories of the origin and age of the universe, let's save that topic for another day. Instead, let's

just assume with them for a moment that what we are seeing here shows us the universe shortly after it came into existence.

If that is true, what would those astronomers have expected to see through that giant telescope? The short answer is that what they would have expected to see is the opposite of what they saw! The Webb telescope has exploded the Big Bang!

Each of the four images from that telescope shown on the Handout looks like just a tiny speck, but each of those tiny specks is actually an entire galaxy with as many as a billion stars.

But before astronomers saw these galaxies, they would have told you that such galaxies were impossible. Don't believe me? Notice the name of the fourth image on the Handout — "MoM-z14." "MoM" stands for "Mirage or Miracle!" That galaxy is the most distant galaxy ever observed — and it was not at all what they expected to see. It does not fit in at all with the Big Bang model.

According to that model, galaxies far back in time should be slow, dim, and simple, but the galaxies they are seeing at the edge of the visible universe are fast, bright, and complex. This, they say, suggests that "the early universe might have been far more active than we imagined" and that our current models are "incomplete."

And as for that Big Bang, many astronomers are now saying that it must have happened literally everywhere at once. They say that matter came into existence everywhere in the universe at a particular time.

An active early universe that came into existence everywhere at a particular instant of time? That is what the astronomers are now seeing

through their brand new telescope. But isn't that also just what we find in the opening verse of the Bible?

Genesis 1:1 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

I don't know about you, but that sounds to me like an active early universe that came into existence everywhere at a particular instant of time! We can see that by looking at God's creation, but we can also see that by looking at God's word.

We can learn a great deal about God by looking at what God has created — but there are many other things about God that we cannot learn that way. For example, the stars cannot tell us about the gospel of God. For that, we must open the word of God. That truth about God comes, not from God's creation, but only from God's word.

Verse 20 tells us that those invisible attributes of God are clearly perceived — but there are many who do not see God in God's creation. And verse 20 says that they are without excuse. But what else can we say about such people? Paul answers that question in the next verse.

Romans 1:21

Romans 1:21 — 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 their foolish hearts were darkened.

Verse 21 explains why those who suppress the truth about God are without excuse. And the key phrase in verse 21 is the first phrase: "they knew God." And that is why ignorance was no excuse. They were not ignorant! They knew God!

We are not reading here about those who did not know God. In fact, I think Paul is telling us here that there is no one in that group. Everyone knows! And, yes, even those who call themselves atheists. They know God.

Just think for a moment about the statement, “I do not believe in God.” Isn’t there some knowledge of God that is implicit in that statement? Atheists may not believe in God — but they have knowledge of God. How can they argue otherwise when the word “atheist” itself includes the word for “God”!

But why would someone who knows about God and who can plainly see the evidence for God reject that knowledge and deny that evidence? Doesn’t the remainder of this chapter answer that question? Isn’t it because they want to live in sin (verse 27)? Isn’t it because they are proud of their sin (verse 30)? Isn’t it because they approve of sin (verse 32)? In short, the picture here is that of an angry sinner shaking his fist at God. That is why they reject that knowledge and ignore that evidence — they want to continue living in sin.

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 their foolish hearts were darkened.

Yes, verse 21 is a description of the sinful Gentile world in the first century — but verse 21 is also a description of the sinful world in any century. They knew God, but they neither honored God nor gave thanks to God.

When we look at the world that God made for us — not only should we honor God for his great power, but we should thank God for all of

the good things that he has made for us and that he provides for us. That is exactly what Paul said to the people of Lystra in Acts 14.

Acts 14:15-17 — Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

And Jesus tells us about those gifts from God.

Matthew 5:45 — For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

But those gifts from God did not cause the people here in verse 21 to honor God or to thank God. Instead, they rejected God, and they rejected the gifts of God. “They became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

And note that verse 21 is very clear that these people were not born that way. Instead, they **became** that way. Whatever Paul is describing here, it was not something that they had at birth.

But then how did they become this way? How did they learn this? From whom did they learn this?

I hate to say it, but verse 21 is a perfect description of our modern system of higher education. The Bible says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10), but the university says the

opposite — that the denial of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. They say that the first step to wisdom is to cast aside your belief in God.

But what does God say? We just read it — casting aside your belief in God is not the first step to wisdom but is instead the first step in becoming futile in your thinking and having your foolish heart darkened. Casting aside your belief in God is not the first step to becoming a wise man, but rather is the first step to becoming a fool.

What we are about to see in Romans 1 is a terrible descent into depravity. And what we are seeing here in verse 21 is the first step in that terrible descent.

And this sad state of futility and foolishness and darkness is not something **God** did to these people. Instead, it is something they did to themselves. God wanted just the opposite to happen. God wanted them to honor him and to thank him — but they refused to do so. And that refusal is what led to this futility and foolishness and darkness.

Verse 21 is describing, not the punishment of sin, but the consequence of sin (to the extent that a consequence of a sin is not itself a built-in punishment for that sin). And I think we will see some other such consequences of sin as we study the remainder of this chapter.

Romans 1:22

Romans 1:22 — Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

When you stroll across the campus of The University of Texas at Austin, you will no doubt see the main building and the tall tower at

the center of the campus. And you will also see the motto engraved over the entrance to that main building: “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” I have walked past that inscription countless times, and I know that many other universities also display that same inscription.

Why do I mention it? Because I wonder, given the state of higher education today, whether Romans 1:22 might not have been a better choice for those university inscriptions: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” I doubt we will see that verse on any university buildings, but it would certainly be a lot more accurate!

I have looked at many commentaries on verse 22, but the best commentary on verse 22 is the inspired commentary that Paul provides elsewhere. What Paul says here in one verse, Paul explained elsewhere in 12 verses.

1 Corinthians 1:18-29 — For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, broth-

ers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

There is a great deal of overlap between what Paul wrote there and what Paul is writing here in Romans. And we should remember that Paul was in Corinth when he wrote Romans, and that Paul was trying to prevent Rome from experiencing the problems he had seen in Corinth. We need to keep our bookmark in the Corinthian letters as we study this letter to the Romans.

What we are seeing here is that God and the world have completely different views of wisdom. In fact, their views are polar opposites — what God calls wisdom, the world calls foolishness, and what God calls foolishness, the world calls wisdom. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

And I think what we can see here in these verses is a test — a test of how close we are to God. The closer we are to God, the closer God’s view will be to our view. And the further we are from God, the further God’s view will be to our view.

- What about wisdom? Is our definition of wisdom also God’s definition? Or do we view wisdom the way the world does?

- What about the church? Is our definition of the church also God's definition? Or do we view the church the way the world does?
- What about sin? Is our definition of sin also God's definition? Or do we view sin the way the world does?
- What about the gospel? Is our definition of the gospel also God's definition? Or do we view the gospel the way the world does?

In short, are we swimming upstream or downstream? If we are seeing things as God sees them, then we can be certain that we are swimming upstream — against the flow of this world.

Verse 22 says that they claimed to be wise — but where? Where did man claim to be wise? Well, for starters, we named ourselves the wise man! That is what “*homo sapiens*” means — wise man. Mankind is lacking in many areas, but one thing mankind has never lacked is in the confidence it has in its own abilities and its own wisdom.

I think that every generation mankind thinks about itself in the same way that Job's three friends thought about themselves: “No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you” (Job 12:2). But what we think about ourselves is not the question. Instead the question is what God thinks about us. And God is not impressed with the wisdom of this world: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

Romans 1:23

Romans 1:23 — and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Verse 23 is all about false religion. And, of course, every religion other than the religion from God is a false religion. And the world is full of false religions. The world is full of man-made religions.

But that is not how the world sees things. The world tells us that there are many paths to God — and that we can each choose our own path. But that is the wisdom of the world, and we just looked at what God thinks about the wisdom of the world — it is foolishness.

And what does the wisdom of God say? “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) That is what the wisdom of God has to say about all of the world’s false religions. None of them is a path to God.

And all of the world’s false religions have something else in common — they have all exchanged the glory of God for something else. Rather than glorifying God, they all glorify an image — perhaps an image of themselves, or perhaps an image of something else created by God. That is what verse 23 is telling us.

When it comes to the false religions of this world, verse 23 is a damning indictment. The world may see those religions as just another path to God, but that is not how God sees them.

- God sees those false religions, not as an ascent to him, but rather as a descent from truth.

- God sees those false religions, not as evidence of man's goodness, but as evidence of man's deepest corruption.
- God sees those false religions, not as something that honors him, but as something that has exchanged his glory for a worthless image.

The description in verse 23 of people who “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” reminds us of the Second Commandment:

Exodus 20:4-6 — You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them...

God knew that the Gentile world was filled with such idolatry, but God did not want his people to be like the world. His people were to be different from the world. But, of course, we know that very often they were instead just like the world.

Psalms 106:19-22 — They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. **They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.** They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

Earlier we said that Paul was setting a trap for the Jews here in this first chapter. It sounds like Paul is talking only about the sins of the Gentiles, but Paul will very soon accuse the Jews of doing the same things.

The Jews will see this in chapter 2, but they should have seen it coming in chapter 1! Why? Because the phrase that Paul uses here in verse 23 comes from the verses we just read in Psalm 106 describing the Jews. “They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.”

Perhaps some of the more observant Jewish readers of verse 23 were now wondering why Paul quoted Psalm 106 about the Jews in his condemnation of those awful Gentiles! Paul will very soon answer that question!