

Romans: The Good News of God

Without Excuse

Romans 1:20

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Without Excuse

Scripture

Recently, I read the following announcement that presumably appeared in a church bulletin:

To make it possible for everyone to attend church next Sunday, we are going to have a special “No Excuse Sunday.” Beds will be placed in the foyer for those who say, “Sunday is my only day to sleep in.” Eye solution will be available for those with tired eyes—from watching television too late on Saturday night. We will have steel helmets for those who say, “The roof would cave in if I ever came to church.” Blankets will be provided for those who think the church is too cold, and fans for those who think the church is too hot. We will have hearing aids for those who say, “The Pastor speaks too softly,” and cotton wool for those who say he preaches too loudly. Score cards will be available for those who wish to list the hypocrites present. Some relatives will be in attendance for those who like to go visiting on Sunday. There will be 100 TV dinners for those who cannot go to church and cook dinner also. One section will be devoted to trees and grass for those who like to seek God in nature. Finally, the sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who have never seen the church without them.

We smile at this announcement. Some of us may even recognize ourselves in the announcement! Some people have all kinds of excuses for not attending church.

These are not unlike the excuses we make for not believing God. Today, I want to talk about the excuses we make for failing to acknowledge, seek, and worship the living God.

Our text is Romans 1:20 in which the apostle Paul says that we are in fact **without excuse** before God. Let me read Romans 1:18-20 so that we can see the context for today’s text:

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ 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.**

Introduction

We seem to have an almost infinite capacity for making excuses. In the book, *The Sports Hall of Shame*, a place kicker for the Dallas Cowboys named Raphael Septian is mentioned. He was a good kicker, but he was an even better master at making excuses when he missed a kick.

For example, when he was kicking against the Houston Oilers one day, he missed four out of five field goal attempts. When asked why, he said, “Well, I was too busy reading the scoreboard.”

Then, when he was in Texas stadium, he missed a kick and the reporters asked him why and he said, “The grass was too tall.”

The problem is, Texas stadium doesn't have any grass—it's artificial turf!

And then when he missed another field goal, he said, “The thirty second clock distracted me.”

Another time he said, “My helmet was too tight and it was squeezing my brain and I couldn't think.”

But once (and this is his all-time greatest excuse), when yet another field goal attempt went wide, he turned to his holder, quarterback Danny White, and said, “No wonder it went wide. You placed the ball upside down!”

Lesson

Today's text says that in spite of our almost infinite capacity for making excuses, we are all **without excuse** for our failure to

acknowledge, seek, and worship the true and living God. Today, I want to try and answer some of the excuses that we make in our failure to acknowledge, seek and worship the true and living God.

I. “I Didn’t Know God Existed”

The first of our excuses is that we do not know that God exists—or at least, that we do not know for sure that he exists.

Every era has had its characteristic excuses for failure to seek and worship God, but in our “scientific age,” this is certainly a common rationalization.

Do you remember when the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin returned to earth from his short time in space? He said with typical atheistic arrogance, “I did not see God.” The fact that he did not see God was supposed to be proof of God’s nonexistence.

What he said is typical of many people. It is the argument that science either has disproved God or else has been unable to give adequate evidence for affirming his existence.

Now, I want to stress what I hope is clear to many of you. Since the Bible is *God’s* Word, we need to align our views with what *God* says in his Word. Ultimately, all our views must be submissive to the Word of God.

We may say, “There is no evidence for God.” Or, “There is insufficient evidence for God.”

But God says that quite the contrary is in fact the case. God says, in Romans 1:20, that “since the creation of the world [his] invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been *clearly seen*, being *understood* from what has been made” (italics mine). In other words, there is no excuse for ignorance about the existence of God.

The alternative put forward today is that the universe is eternal because matter is eternal, and that all we see has come about over a long period of time as the result of chance or random occurrences. This, for example, was the view of Carl Sagan, who affirmed the eternity of matter. “In the beginning was the cosmos,”

said Sagan. But think through the problems of this view.

Suppose everything we see did evolve over long periods of time from mere matter. Suppose our complex universe came from something less complex. And that less complex something came from something still less complex. Suppose we push everything back until we come to “mere matter,” which is supposed to be eternal. Have we solved the problem? Not at all! We are trying to explain the complex forms of matter as we know them today, but where did those forms come from? Some would say that the form or purpose we see was somehow in matter to begin with. But, if that is the case, then the matter we are talking about is no longer “mere matter.” It already had purpose, organization, and form. And we need to ask how these very significant elements got there in the first place. At some point we must inevitably find ourselves looking for the Purposer, Organizer, or Former.

Can anyone really affirm that God does not exist in the face of the evidence for the existence of God in creation? The Bible says we cannot, and an analysis of the options supports the Bible’s statement. Ignorance is no excuse for failing to seek and worship God, *because we are not ignorant*.

II. “I Have Too Many Questions”

There are people who might even agree that God exists but who would nevertheless excuse themselves on the ground that they still have too many questions about Christianity.

They recognize that the God we are talking about is not just any “god” but the God who has not only revealed himself in creation but also in Scripture. And when they think about that they have a host of questions. They suppose that these are valid excuses for their rejection of God. For example, their excuse might be one or more of the following excuses.

First, what about the poor innocent native in Africa who has never heard of Jesus Christ? Every preacher gets asked this question. In fact, it is probably the question most asked by Christians

and non-Christians alike.

The implication behind this question is that the “innocent” native is going to be sent to hell for failing to do something he has never had an opportunity to do, namely, believe in Jesus Christ as his Savior, and that a God who would be so unjust as to condemn the “innocent” native cannot be God.

But that is not the case in regard to the “innocent” native in Africa. To be sure, the native is innocent of failing to believe in Jesus if he or she has never heard of Jesus. But it is not for this that the native or anyone else who has not heard of Jesus is condemned. As Romans 1 tells us, the native is condemned for failing to do what he actually knows he should do, that is, acknowledge, seek, and worship the true and living God revealed in creation. In other words, the “innocent” native is not condemned for not having heard of Jesus (which, after all, is not his fault), but, rather, he is condemned because of his sin.

Everyone falls short here. A person might argue that the native actually does seek God, offering as proof the widespread phenomenon of religion in the world. Man has rightly been called *homo religiosus*. But that is no excuse either, for the universality of religion, as Paul shows in the next verses, is actually evidence of man’s godlessness. Why? Because the religions that man creates are actually attempts to escape from having to face the true God. We invent religion—not because we are seeking God, but because we are running away from him. And therefore we are not innocent.

Second, isn’t the Bible full of contradictions? This is an excuse we also often hear, but it is as insubstantial as the first one. We are told that as the data from science has come in, so many errors have been found in the Bible that no rational person could possibly believe that it is God’s true revelation. It follows that at best the Bible is a collection of insightful human writings, so no one can intelligently buy into Christianity on the basis of the biblical “revelation.”

The problem with this excuse is its premise. It assumes that the accumulation of historical and scientific facts has uncovered an

increasing number of textual and other problems, but actually the opposite is the case. As the data has come in over the years, particularly over the last few decades, the tendency is for the Bible to be vindicated.

Time magazine recognized this in a cover story in the December 30, 1974, issue. The story was captioned “How True Is the Bible?” In this essay the magazine’s editors examined the chief radical critics of the recent past—Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, and others—but concluded:

The breadth, sophistication and diversity of all this biblical investigation are impressive, but it begs a question: Has it made the Bible more credible or less? . . . Believers . . . may well conclude that its credibility has been enhanced. After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps the better for the siege.

Even on the critics’ own terms—historical fact—the scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.¹

It is hard to see how anyone can use the alleged “contradictions” in the Bible to justify a failure to acknowledge, seek and worship the true God of the Bible, especially after he has investigated the evidence thoroughly.

And third, if there is a God and the God who exists is a good God, why does he tolerate evil? This argument has two forms. One form is philosophical, asking how evil could have entered a world created and ruled by a benevolent God. The other is personal and practical, asking why things happen to me that I do not like, or why God does not give me what I ask him for, or do what I tell him in my prayers I want him to do.

The philosophical problem frankly is difficult. If we ask how evil could originate in an originally perfect world, there is no one, as far as I know, who has ever answered that question adequately.

¹ *Time*, Dec. 30, 1974, 41.

If God made all things good, including Adam and Eve, so that nothing within them naturally inclined toward evil in any way, then it is difficult (if not impossible) to see how Adam or Eve or any perfect being could do evil.

But I must point out that although Christians may not have an adequate explanation for the origin of evil (at least at this point in the history of theological thought), our difficulty here is at least only half as great as the problem non-Christians have. For, you see, non-Christians have the problem not only of explaining the origin of evil; they also have the problem of explaining the origin of the good as well.

In any case, our failure to understand how evil came about does not disprove its existence any more than it disproves the existence of God.

The second form of this problem is personal and practical. It is the form of the question that probably troubles people most: “Why does God tolerate evil, particularly in my life? Why do bad things happen to me? Why doesn’t God answer my prayers as I would like?”

Part of the answer to this problem is that if we got what we deserved, we would be suffering not merely the evils we now know in this life but rather those eternal torments that are to be the lot of the unconverted in hell. In other words, instead of asking, “Why do bad things happen to me?” we should be asking, “Why do good things happen to me?” All we deserve is condemnation. If life has any good in it, that good (however minimal) should point us to the God from whom all good comes. That we do not follow that leading, but instead complain about God’s treatment, only increases our guilt. It shows us to be precisely what Paul declares we are in Romans 1:18: godless and wicked.

Another part of the answer to this problem is that we must come to practical grips with the truth that God is truly sovereign. He knows all things and is in control of all things. We are finite and we do not know all things and are not in control of all things. And God allows adversity and suffering and difficulty to come in

to our lives for a reason—to grow in grace.

C. S. Lewis likened God's use of adversity to walking a dog. If the dog gets its leash wrapped around a pole and tries to continue running forward, he will only tighten the leash more. Both the dog and the owner are after the same end, forward motion, but the owner must resist the dog by pulling him opposite the direction he wants to go (if the dog is heading toward the pole). The master, sharing the same intention but understanding better than the dog where he really wants to go, takes an action precisely opposite to that of the dog's will. It is in this way that God uses adversity. He uses adversity to help us grow in grace.

Corrie Ten Boom in *The Hiding Place* relates an incident that taught her this principle. She and her sister, Betsy, had just been transferred to the worst German prison camp they had seen yet, Ravensbruck.

Upon entering the barracks, they found them extremely overcrowded and flea-infested. Their Scripture reading that morning in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 had reminded them to rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances. Betsy told Corrie to stop and thank the Lord for every detail of their new living quarters.

Corrie at first flatly refused to give thanks for the fleas, but Betsy persisted. Corrie finally gave in and gave thanks for the fleas. During the months spent at that camp, they were surprised to find how openly they could hold Bible study and prayer meetings without interference from the prison guards.

It was only several months later that they learned that the guards would not enter the barracks. Why? *Because* of the fleas!

God used their adversity to allow them an opportunity to study his Word and grow in grace without interference from the prison guards.

Is it right to have questions about why God acts as he does? Sure it is! Who has not had questions? It is right to trust God and continue to seek further understanding.

But to use an inability to understand some things as an ex-

cuse for failing to respond to what we do know is that deliberate suppression of the truth about which Paul is speaking in Romans 1:18-20.

III. “I Didn’t Think It Was Important”

Finally, the weakest excuse that anyone can muster is the statement, “I just didn’t think it was important.”

That is obviously faulty—if God exists and we are all destined to meet him and give an account of our actions some day, then nothing can be as important as getting the most basic of our relationships right: the relationship of ourselves to God.

And yet, for one reason or another—perhaps just because the press of life’s many demands seems more important—we push this greatest of all issues aside.

How do you think that is going to sound when we appear before God on the last day?

“I didn’t think it was important”?

“I didn’t think *you* were important”?

“I didn’t think my suppression of the truth about you mattered”?

A little later on in Romans, Paul tells what is going to happen on that last day. Men and women are going to appear before God with their excuses, but when they do so, says Paul, “Every mouth [will] be silenced and the whole world [will be] held accountable to God” (Romans 3:19b).

Even in this day there are no valid excuses, as Paul declares in our text (Romans 1:20). But in *that* day the excuses will not even be spoken, so obvious will it be that all human beings—from the smallest to the greatest—are guilty of godlessness.

Conclusion

Since today is not yet that final day, there is still time to turn from the arrogance that pits finite minds and sinful wills against

God.

Do you remember who Methuselah was? He lived longer than any other man did—969 years. His name means “When he is gone, it shall come.” Scholars believe that the “it” referred to in his name refers to the great flood of God’s judgment in the time of Noah. That flood destroyed the antediluvian world.

But the reason I refer to Methuselah and his longevity is that he is a picture of God’s great patience with those who sin against him.

During the early years of Methuselah’s life God sent a preacher named Enoch to turn the people from their sin. Enoch preached that judgment was coming: “See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 14-15).

After Enoch died, Noah continued the preaching. For the entire lifetime of Methuselah, all 969 years, the flood did not come.

God was gracious and patient. But, though patient, God was not indifferent to sin, and at last Methuselah died, and wrath did indeed come.

We live in a similar age today. Today is the day of God’s grace. But wrath is gathering. We see it about us in the rising waters of the flood. Do not wait to be overtaken by it. Do not make excuses any longer. Admit that you are **without excuse** in God’s sight and quickly take refuge in the Savior. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181
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PRAAYER:

O God in heaven above, we are so prone to make excuses.
We make excuses so easily and in so many areas of our lives.
It is bad enough that we make excuses to other people, but it is inexcusable that we should make excuses with reference to yourself.

O Father, forgive us for making excuses to believe in you.
Forgive us for making excuses regarding our sin.
Forgive us for making excuses about our most important relationship, namely, with you.

Help each one of us to believe what you say about yourself and about ourselves in your Word.

Enable us to believe that you have provided a way of escape from eternal condemnation through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Grant us the gift of faith and repentance so that we may be reconciled to you, now and for all eternity.

And all of this we pray in your wonderful name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.