

WHY I BELIEVE

The Heathen Have Rejected Light

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Confusion often reigns among true Christians over the matter of light to the heathen. They agree that the heathen are lost because they have no Savior, but there is disagreement over the meaning of light and the seeking after more light.
- B. The standard verse on the heathen is Romans 1:18-20. When we deal with this context, we must ask ourselves what God has said on the subject, not what we think or feel God should do from our emotional, human reason.
- C. Romans 1:18-20 is in the section of the Book of Romans which is showing that all men are sinners, both Jews and Gentiles, and are under the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18 – 3:20). NOTE: This section in the argument of Romans has nothing to do with men hearing the gospel but only shows the sinful condition of every sinner's heart.
- D. Romans 1:18-20 is dealing with the Gentile in particular and shows why they are under God's wrath. The context is not necessarily about heathen but includes all Gentiles whether an educated Greek, a cultured Roman, a scientific American or an ignorant bushman in the jungle.
- E. Romans 1:18-20 deals with a time when the Gentiles had a knowledge of the one true God but rejected it, leaving themselves open for all kinds of perversions about God. (The Apostle Paul proves the Gentiles guilty by the rejection of light that God has given them. He shows the religious apostasy of Gentiles from the original revelation of God that they possessed. Paul does not say when this apostasy took place but he indicates that it was conclusive and the effects continue even today.) NOTE: The immediate context is not about heathen but the principle can be directly applied to the heathen who have never heard the gospel.

II. FOUR BASIC PREMISES FOR UNDERSTANDING ROMANS 1:18-20

- A. The argument in context is not dealing with salvation but with condemnation.
- B. God has given all men some spiritual light.

- C. The light that men have is rejected.
- D. The context has nothing to do about men seeking more light. This is another problem in itself. This section is concluded with the words “none seek after God: (Rom. 3:11). NOTE: The point is that natural man, because he is a sinner by nature, rejects whatever light God has given him. It is man’s very nature to reject and rebel against God.

III. THE REVELATION OF THE WRATH OF GOD

- A. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.
 - i. The wrath of God comes down upon all men who are sinners, every Gentile who holds the truth in unrighteousness.
 - ii. This in context is looking back to primitive man not the savage man. Way back in the history of Gentiles all had a concept of the true God. They were monotheists. However, because they were sinners by nature, they corrupted the light that they did have about God and rejected the true God of the Bible. They held truth about God, but suppressed it and rationalized this concept because men love darkness rather than light (John 3:19). Men have a bent or a leaning toward sin and all who reject light go further away from God.
 - iii. POINT: By application we can say that the heathen have truth (light) but they reject it because any God-awareness convicts them of their sinful condition.

IV. THE REVELATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD 1:19-20

- A. “Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.”
 - i. The “because” gives the cause for the wrath of God upon the Gentiles. They had truth about God manifest in them (conscience or mind – John 1:9) which was given by God. Yet, whatever light they had from God they willfully rejected. This is not ignorance but willful rejection of truth.
 - ii. This does not say that everything that can be known of God was revealed to the heathen, but simply that they had such knowledge of God as rendered their rejection inexcusable.
 - iii. POINT: There is no one who lives and dies without some revelation from God – a universal revelation which has reached every one, every where in every age. But whatever knowledge they have they reject willfully because they are sinners by nature.
- B. “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.”

- i. God has made a revelation of himself in nature or creation (general revelation with no saving value). And this general revelation is clearly seen by the Gentiles.
 - ii. The revelation that men can discover from creation is limited but accurate. The Gentile can determine that God is supreme (eternal power) and is a Being (Godhood or God head). God is a supreme being. They can determine that God is one, goodness, wise, all powerful, etc., but creation can never tell any man that God is love, mercy and full of grace to sinners (special revelation).
 - iii. The Gentile has enough knowledge to know that God is every man's Creator and enough knowledge to keep the Gentile worshipping God and not falling into idolatry, but he willfully goes against whatever knowledge of God he has.
 - iv. POINT: These simple evidences are rejected by the heathen. When one understands this, it is not hard to understand why God should be revealing His wrath against them.
- C. "So that they are without excuse."
- i. This might be better translated, "For the purpose that they are without excuse." The thought is that God made a revelation of Himself to the Gentiles in nature that they might be without excuse. The revelation which was rejected because they were sinners simply pointed out the real problem that men are sinners and under the wrath of God. NOTE: The Gentile will not be able to plead ignorance for his sinful condition. He had revelation and rejected what he had.
 - ii. POINT: The revelation of God in creation is sufficient to show a heathen he is without excuse, but it does not follow that it is sufficient to bring that person to salvation. NOTE: There is an inseparable distance between light (general revelation) and a knowledge of Christ through the gospel (special revelation).

V. THE RECEIVING OF LIGHT BY THE HEATHEN

- A. The heathen like any other sinner is lost. While God is not obligated to give all men the same amount of light, whatever light God has given them they have rejected. NOTE: If a man rejects the common grace of God in general revelation, then God is most certainly not obligated to give saving grace through special revelation. However, God is love and mercy and does save many heathen by His grace in spite of their natural rebellion to Him.
- B. Many Christians get light (God-consciousness) confused with the gospel. They think because all men have had some light that all men have had the gospel preached to them. They also feel that all men have had the opportunity to be saved because they have received light. An advocate of this view says,

Heathenism exists where the gospel has been rejected . . . and ever since Adam lived on this earth, there has never been a member of the human race who has not had the opportunity to be saved. (R.B. Thieme, Jr. What About the Heathen?)

ANSWER: The heathen have never had an opportunity to receive the gospel because they have never heard the gospel. If God-consciousness is the same as the truth of the gospel, then all men have heard and could be saved apart from ever hearing the true gospel, providing they live up to the light they have been given. If this were the case, then men could be saved apart from the cross which would contradict the Bible (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). The heathen have light enough to condemn them but not light enough to save them. The only person who can save the heathen is Christ and the gospel must be preached to them (Rom. 1:16).

- C. What happens if a heathen does begin to seek more light? We know that the vast majority of heathen never seek light, but a few do. There is an occasional missionary story about heathen who were waiting for someone to bring them the message of the true God. They obviously sought more light and this is consistent with other scripture (John 7:17; Acts 17:27). Those who seek more light will be brought into contact with the gospel. NOTE: We know, however, that no man in his natural, unsaved state seeks after God (Rom. 3:11). How then can a natural man begin to seek? Only by a previous work of the Holy Spirit, for no person can come to Christ except he is first drawn by the Father (John 6:44). The heathen seek more light as the Holy Spirit draws them to the Savior. If the heathen are seeking light then God will get them the gospel, for they would not be seeking unless God had been previously working and desirous that they should hear the gospel.
- D. No person, not even the heathen, is going to be saved apart from a knowledge of the gospel (Christ died for sinners and all who place their faith in Him shall be saved). It is the responsibility of the Christian to make sure that the heathen hear the gospel (Rom. 10:13-15). The gospel is to go to the ends of the earth (Mark 16:15) and Christians are the means God uses to spread the gospel (Acts 1:8). NOTE: It is the exception when we hear of individual heathen or heathen tribes already prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The normal situation is to go to the heathen and preach them the gospel, trusting the Holy Spirit to take the truth and apply it to their hearts, so they will respond. The Holy Spirit usually and normally works in accordance with the proclaiming of the gospel (John 16:8-11).

“No man should hear the gospel twice until all men have heard it once.”

“Missionaries are those who never get accustomed to the thought of Christless feet on the way to a godless eternity.”