

“Atheists”

Romans 1:18-23, 28-32

June 10, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Have you ever met an atheist? On one hand, it seems that **few people in our lives claim that they do not believe in the existence of a Supreme Being with a personality.** At the same time, there are a lot of things people have lifted up and shown to be their god. We can see it in their lifestyle.

Some people worship money, the social status they feel when they get positions in an organization, material things, power, even pleasure. Many people have valued some *thing* as most important to them, apparently forgetting about God.

Your religion is whatever it is that you value most in your life.

It seems, then, that few come right out and say that ‘there is no God’ in the true sense of atheism, even though they live as if this is their belief. I call these people “closet atheists.”

The most common question that comes to the forefront in a discussion about the existence of God is this: “From where did everything in creation come?” This is the one question often avoided by people who claim there is no God. **“How did all this get started, here in the world, if there is no God?”**

For most of our lives, scientists have been theorizing, that there were collisions of atoms and electrons that split off, forming our part of the cosmos. This is referred to as “The Big Bang Theory.”¹ The evolutionary process is used to attempt to understand how primitive water creatures gradually adapted to the land environment, evolving (for instance) from tad-poles to frogs, and later, on land, from monkeys to people.

A few years ago I read an article in Scientific American magazine which tried to describe how a non-living substance (inorganic) could become organic (or living matter). The researching writers carefully outlined a process of chemical bonding and nuclear structuring changes which would

¹ Of course there are matters of quantum physics as well but summarizing this exceeds the parameters of a sermon format.

somehow transform itself into a living chemical substance.

I believe that our faith should always open itself up to any truth that has been discovered. By now, the evolutionary process is accepted by the Scientific community and few people argue against the understanding that **nature works in an evolutionary pattern.** Things do evolve, so that stronger and healthier species thrive where weaker ones die out. Through time, there is change through adaptation.

Not only can we see that creatures have adapted and changed to their surrounding environment through the thousands of years, I’m willing to believe that perhaps some chemicals, through various interactions with the forces present in the environment, can conceivably become living material – even if those newly formed chemicals are only bacteria (or some other primitive form of what we call life or organic). I also believe that **God started it all.**

In terms of creation, **some Christians believe that God started all this in literally one week’s time.** Others of us agree that it is certainly possible for God to create everything in one literal week because God can do anything. **But others of us also believe that this scientific evidence may be an indication that God probably took a lot longer than 168 hours.**

Hebrew scholars understand that the Hebrew word *yom* in Genesis (that is translated into English as “day”), is used to mean “a time period” or “an era.”

An example is: “In the day of King Hezekiah” referring to the era of his reign. So with the majority of Biblical scholars, I personally believe that the Genesis creation account conveys truth but the way the truth is communicated is through a poetic description which presents images of events in a broad framework.

Genesis was not a videotape moment-by-moment televised documentary of the start of the universe.

It's truth was not in *how* God began the universe. This writer was only trying to convey that somehow God *did* originate all things. For instance, take a look at this outline of Genesis 1.

Outline of Genesis 1:

Domains of Creation	Dwellers of Domain
Light & Darkness Day 1 (Gen. 1:1-5)	Lights in Heaven to rule day and night Day 4 (Gen. 1:14-19)
Earth & Sky Day 2 (Gen. 1:6-8)	Birds of the Air Day 5 (Gen. 1:20-23)
Land & Water & Plants Day 3 (Gen. 1:11-13)	Fish Day 5 (Gen. 1:20-23) Animals Day 6 (Gen. 1:24-25)
People Day 6 (Gen. 1:26-31)	

You see that some verses describe the creation of various kingdoms (or domains of creation). You see in other verses that the corresponding rulers (or dwellers of those domains) were made. So the mention of the various “days” are easier understood as ‘day-frames’—generally setting these parts of creation off, very understandably, so that God’s people could explain the mystery of creation to their children and grandchildren. It was a beautiful and yet orderly portrayal of the awesome mystery of God’s work in creation. So Christians and Jews believe that God caused all of the Universe to come into existence.

The subject of these verses is the key – God. As long as the subject is kept in mind, (that God did all this), I don’t think we really have to worry about how long God took to do it.

It could be understood that God did this, perhaps slowly through the various ages, gradually working out the changes in the environment and the various species but God did it. That’s the point. To argue with our Christian friends, who insist that it only took 168 hours, as opposed to numerous ages or epochs, seems to be less than productive – interesting about which to speculate – but not a wise use of our time. God can do anything so why argue about the speed or time that was involved – especially since study of the Hebrew language yields an understanding that the words likely referred to a larger time span.

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Back in the 19th century, people started getting excited about what was being discovered about the orderliness of the universe. In perceiving this order, people (whom we now refer to as **the “Deists”**) **began to think of God as the Big Watchmaker up in the sky.** They clearly accepted the existence of God but imagined God as Someone Who made the universe, as a watchmaker makes a clock. They suggested that God put creation together, wound it up (so to speak), got it running (like a clock) and then left it alone. And since then, (they thought,) God has not been around but at least they agreed on the big question about Who started it all.

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The point of all this, so far, is that **we don’t have to prove or disprove the worthwhile contribution of the geologists and biologists to talk about the existence of God.**² But if one claims that there is no God and that there is no Ultimate Being behind all that has evolved, then one would likely declare themselves to be “an atheist.” A person adopting this position is actually claiming that the beauty and the largely harmonious world exists and is maintained by *pure chance* – with no thinking or purpose behind it. That belief is blind faith.

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I think the reason most atheists don’t want to talk about the origin of the universe, is that if they did, they would end up *appearing* to have made an incredible leap of blind faith. Blind chance is much more difficult to accept than the belief that Someone put this all together. So most “atheists” just talk about what is going on now and don’t even try to say anything about how things came into existence or how some barely existing protoplasmic blob eventually evolved into a brilliant violin soloist or a laughing brown-eyed child.

In studying other cultures around the world, anthropologists have discovered that **there is almost a universal belief in the existence of a God.** Even the most primitive and non-socially-connected remote tribes discovered believe in some sort of god. In the remote tribal people in the African bush, (who

² Which was the blind spot of the “Scopes Monkey Trial” in which attorneys tried to prove or disprove the existence of God in a court of law.

never heard of a book or anyone living outside of their tribe) . . . even those people believe in a Creator. This is because it doesn't take much figuring to look up at the stars or the land and trees to realize that a thinking, highly artistic and caring Being has made the universe. It just didn't happen by chance or accident.

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So we might ask, if the order and beauty is so obvious in nature, **why is it that so many people don't appear to believe in God?** Paul tries to answer this in his letter to the Romans.

The subject of Paul's opening paragraphs is the wrath of God. But why is God angry?

Paul says God is angry because of people's sin – specifically the wrong of suppressing the truth. The word here for suppressing carries with it the meaning of *'holding down, pushing with a force or binding with pressure.'* God is angry because people are suppressing (and actively denying) the truth about God. But what truth is that?

Paul suggests that people are denying the truth that there is a God and this truth, verse 19 says, is supposedly plain to people because God has shown it to them. Paul's verse 20 says, "ever since creation, God's invisible nature – namely God's eternal power and deity – could be clearly understood by all people." What **Paul is talking about is the universal realization that Someone must have put all this together** and it should be just as plain to the PhD physics professor as it is to the tribesperson dwelling in a primitive culture cut off from the modern world.

Some might quickly respond: "Now wait a minute. You believe whatever you want to believe. I personally just don't go along with all that 'God' business."

But Paul is saying, that when someone suppresses the truth that they know within them to be true, they are denying the truth of God in themselves and that is a serious matter. Paul, in verse 20, goes on to say, "So they are without excuse. They know about God but they did not honor God or give thanks to God." Implying that we, as **God's creatures, have a primary obligation to recognize and honor the One Who made us.** Paul is saying that the person who never worships God – who never truly gives thanks to their Maker but merely goes about their jobs

and activities, living just for themselves – those people are dishonoring God.

Paul not only describes people's inner denial (of what they know as true) but goes on to condemn their behavior of suppressing the truth and actively living their life as if it doesn't matter what they do.

Paul's argument, here, is that God cares about our actions. God made us so that what we do with our lives matters. But since these people are without excuse, their lives start to show the results of the foolishness of their denial of the truth. "They become futile in their thinking and their senseless minds are darkened," Paul says, "because they have exchanged the immortal God for images." (So instead of worshipping God, they worship things, like their jobs, popularity, money, cars, or pleasure.)

"Therefore," Paul goes on, "**God gave them up.**" God, in effect, says, *'All right, if you insist on rebelling against the truth, if you insist on going your own way – demanding against reason that there is no God, I'm going to let you go ahead and live like that. You're going to be allowed to live out your life, living only for yourself, having no real purpose for your existence other than trying to make yourself happy your own way. You are on your own – good luck!'*

You see, it's not that God is hiding in a secret cave and saying: "Anyone who comes into this secret cave can find out the truth but those who don't find out about it... it's just too bad." Rather, everyone who lives on this earth has no excuse for not acknowledging God. But since some people insist on not recognizing God (Who made them), God is going to let them go their own way, to their lonely, shallow meaningless life – allowing them to vainly worship people rather than the Creator.

Because people are left to their choice of a shallow self-centered existence, we see twisted things happening through the generations. We see the hatred, pride and greed that causes devastating wars, ongoing pollution of our environment and the destruction in our relationships.

Because of people denying even the existence of the One Who made them, they end up so starved for meaning in life, that they will try anything for a temporary thrill in their existential depression. People say, "It's o.k. to just live it up, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else!" But in doing so, they are

denying that God exists and has shown us how to live with purpose in Christ. So out of the desperation, Paul is saying, they not only ‘do their own thing,’ they approve of (and encourage others to do) evil things as well. I’ll only briefly note that a fuller context and language study indicates that Paul, in verses 26-27, is apparently referring to the distorted and hedonistic enslaving or hiring of young boys for sex, not to relationships of equality between mutually oriented adults.³

But people who live their life in rebellion against God, I think, are inwardly afraid. We see some folks often doing token things, charitable good deeds, hoping the good they do will “be enough.”

Romans 2:16 says that God judges even a person’s secret life so that each person’s conscience (within them) will tell the story. We are judged on the basis of what we do know and *God knows our hearts*.

I personally don’t believe there is any such thing as someone who is honestly searching for God

³ Romans 1:26-27 “fit the overall theme of Romans which is about the justice and mercy of God. In the midst of this discussion come the texts in which several lists of vices are given which are ethical results of sinful living. Each list is introduced with the phrase, “God gave them up,” in relation to the specific human behavior of heart, passions and mind. In mentioning homosexuality, Paul is using the same phrasing by his contemporary, Philo, in condemning pederasty (love of young boys) “against nature.” It isn’t a reference to Genesis creation stories or a theory of natural law but a common place phrase used by Greeks who were attacking pederasty. Also the word shame (askemosune) is a typical negative Greek judgment on pederasty found in many Greek writers. Since these two verses stem from Paul’s own Jewish tradition, it can be fairly said that Paul is not especially incensed against homosexuality. He opposes it but is likely referring to pederasty when he is attacking homosexuality here. The practice of pederasty was widely common in the Greco-Roman world Paul could stand on many street corners in Corinth on any evening and see the call boys strutting their stuff. Paul would not have known about equal homosexual relationships.” Poderic P. Frohman “What Does the Bible Really Say About Homosexuality?” 1/1/1992 Also referencing Professor Robin Scroggs, Professor of New Testament at Chicago Theological Seminary. The topic of homosexuality exceeds the scope of this discussion but it is dealt with more thoroughly in another talk on orientation issues (6/24/01)

but not finding God. The existence of God is plain to anyone from just observing nature and the cosmos. The power of the revelation of the Christ is so profound and so widely proclaimed in this now little world, that one would be hard pressed to argue with God that it never *occurred* to them that a personal God exists and has communicated to us.

So Paul is saying that there is simply no half-way point of acknowledging God. That there is no putting off what we know to be true until later on in life. He is saying that this is the most important matter in our entire life – the recognition of the reality of our Maker and the ensuing ethical responsibilities we have in following what we’ve been taught in our choices for life. In short, we are either to change, risk and grow to be all we were meant to be – OR continue to pretend that God is not around. If we continue to pretend God is dead, it is most ominous. If we make ourselves (our feelings and our own will) the center of our universe; if we try to live as if each of us are autonomous, that is the height of arrogance.

Even if things seem to be going smoothly (for one who suppresses the truth of God), there is **one question that will haunt them for their entire life. The question is, “What if I am wrong and there actually is a holy and almighty God Who has expectations for my life?”**

What a matter about which to be mistaken!

Jesus once said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free.” We can rejoice that we are free to examine new things in nature and scientist’s discoveries – free to grow and learn more about our God and our world. But remember that as we are set free to grow and learn, we are also set free to give of ourselves to help others find their path back to all whom they were meant to be by God. We are set free to help others find their way out of the despair and desperation that they so profoundly feel (in their attempt to live life without a relationship with their Maker).

Similar to the instructions given to the angels on the TV show “Touched by An Angel,” you have an assignment.

Your assignment, this week, is to watch for the desperation of someone in your life and

touch them with your knowledge and love of
God your Maker. 🙏