

# “They” Knew God

[Romans 1:18-25](#)



**W**e began, in our last study, looking at the second section of Romans which runs from [1:18-3:20](#). The common reading of this passage is to say that all human beings are sinful. But what we must see is that this passage is tied in to the revelation of the covenant faithfulness of God. God is the righteous Judge whose wrath is extended toward the covenant breakers. The covenant was always the means of dealing with evil.

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, Romans 1:18 NASB**

**“The wrath of God”**—God’s wrath in the Bible is never capricious, self-indulgent, or irritable. God’s wrath in the Bible is always judicial. It is the wrath of a judge administering justice.

People today may not want to see God as a God of wrath but the Bible clearly shows us this attribute of God. This truth is made clear in the many Scriptures which paint an absolutely fearful and horrifying picture of God’s wrath:

**Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the LORD God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘If you will indeed go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then you will live, this city will not be burned with fire, and you and your household will survive. ‘But if you will not go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then this city will be given over to the hand of the Chaldeans; and they will burn it with fire, and you yourself will not escape from their hand.’” Jeremiah 38:17-18 NASB**

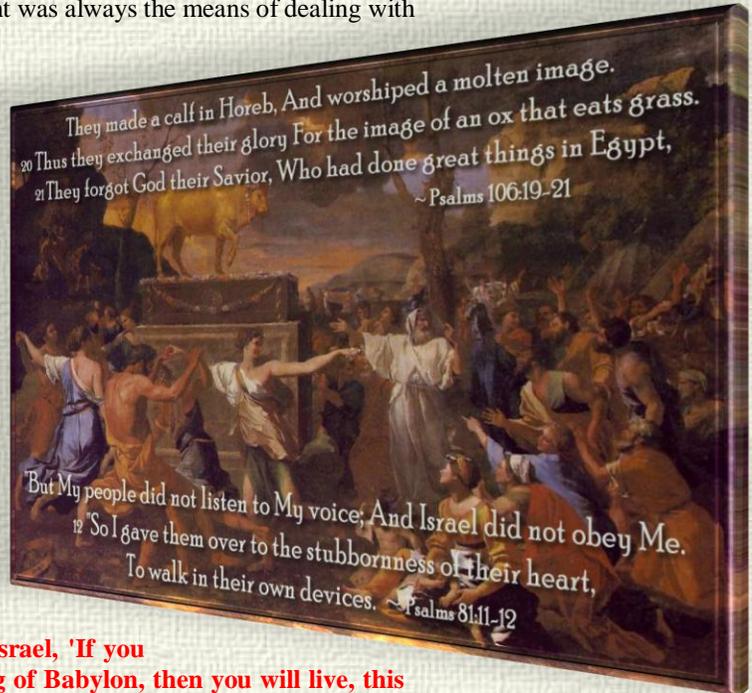
Zedekiah is told by God through Jeremiah to surrender to the Babylonians. After a thirty month siege the Babylonians broke through the city wall. Zedekiah disobeyed God and wrath came:

**Then the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes at Riblah; the king of Babylon also slew all the nobles of Judah. He then blinded Zedekiah's eyes and bound him in fetters of bronze to bring him to Babylon. Jeremiah 39:6-7 NASB**

Zedekiah was forced to watch as the Babylonians slaughtered his sons. To seal this sight of horror in Zedekiah’s mind forever, the Babylonians then put out Zedekiah’s eyes. The entire Bible is supportive of the truth that God is a God of wrath.

But carnal men fight the truth of Scripture. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a book, [“A Guide to the Understanding of the Bible”](#). It really should have been entitled, A Guide to the Misunderstanding of the Bible. There is a chapter in the book in which he discussed **the evolution of God** in the Bible.

He said that the story of man, according to the Bible, was that primitive man had a kind of devilish concept of God. Noah's God destroyed the earth with a flood and, therefore, he was kind of a blood thirsty God. Abraham's God, according to Fosdick, was the same kind of God, except that he seemed to delight in animal sacrifices. And the God of Moses was a horrible God of volcanic fire speaking to men from Sinai...so little by little, man advanced to higher conceptions of God.



David began to have some rather high ethical thoughts about God. They were mixed, however, with those imprecatory Psalms in which David calls down the judgment of God upon certain individuals.

But, by the time of the prophets, Mr. Fosdick said, *"God was really making improvement. He now hated unrighteousness and spoke out against crimes committed by men and when Jesus came along, well Jesus gave men a beautiful concept of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. But, there was one thing that was faulty in Jesus' theology and that is, he was always talking about hell. But, fortunately, now since Jesus is no longer with us, we've reached the place now where we have modern ideas of God that are worthy of the name. He has no hell for the wicked and man and God are now able to have fellowship with one another, because God has become so respectable that he can be worshiped in Highland Park, and University Park, and Richardson, and any other of the places where nice people are supposed to live."*

People do not like the fact that God is a God of wrath, so they go to great lengths to do away with the wrath of God.

Notice what Paul says about this wrath,

*"Is being revealed from heaven"*—to understand this we must see the parallelism in the language and structure between verse 17 and 18. He said in verse 17 that God's righteousness is being revealed in the gospel, so in verse 18 we see that God's wrath is also being revealed in the gospel. Paul's gospel reveals God's covenant faithfulness which involves the announcement that God will judge the covenant breakers, and that the agent of this divine judgment is Jesus. Notice what Paul says in Acts 17:

**because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." Acts 17:31 NASB**

He will judge the world in covenant faithfulness. Negatively, this means that since the verbal revelation of God is now extending to the whole earth, the wrath of God is being poured out on all who reject the Gospel.

Believing Christ leads to salvation; disbelieving Christ leads to wrath. The judgment is definite, *"He has fixed a day."* And it will be universal—*"He will judge the world in righteousness."*

Paul tells us that God will judge the world, **"through a Man whom He has appointed."** Who is that man?

**"For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, John 5:22 NASB**

**and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. John 5:27 NASB**

The Lord Jesus Christ is the judge of all men. Paul goes on to say, *"Having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."* Jesus Christ repeatedly told His followers that He would judge the world. Though He was put to death by the Jews, God raised Him from the dead. And by raising Him from the dead, God set His seal on the doctrines He taught; one of these doctrines was that He would judge the world. His resurrection is an incontestable proof that He will judge the world, according to His own declaration.

I think that all Christians would agree that Jesus Christ has been appointed by the Father to be the judge of the **inhabited earth**. But a real disagreement arises when you discuss **when** the judgment is to take place. Just as our text tells us of the certainty of judgment, it also tells us the when of judgment. Paul says, **"He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness"**—do you see the "when" in this verse? No, you don't because the NASB obscures the text. Look at the YLT:

**because He did set a day in which He is about to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom He did ordain, having given assurance to all, having raised him out of the dead.' Acts 17:31 YLT**

The word **"will"** in the NASB is the Greek word *mello*. Whenever *mello* in the present active indicative is combined with an infinitive, it is consistently translated **"about to."** Paul told his first century audience that God was **"about to"** judge the world.

So Paul tells the Athenians that judgment is **"about to come,"** he says this to Timothy also:

**I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Timothy 4:1 NASB**

Here “*who is to*” is that same Greek word, *mello*. Paul again is telling his first century readers that Jesus is about to judge the living and the dead. This is to happen at His appearing! Christ’s Second Coming is a coming in judgment.

**I do fully testify, then, before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who is about to judge living and dead at his manifestation and his reign-- 2 Timothy 4:1 YLT**

When was this judgment to take place?

**"Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. Revelation 22:12 NASB**

It was to happen “*quickly*.” The judgment that Paul spoke of was near, it was about to happen and it was being revealed. We know that it happened in A.D. 70. when God judged the world.

God’s wrath is being revealed “*against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*”—the word “*ungodliness*” is from the Greek word *asebeia*, it focuses on the relationship to God. God wrath is revealed toward those who are not rightly related to Him.

“*Unrighteousness*”—this is from the Greek *adikia*, it has to do with our treatment of fellow men. When Jesus was asked by the lawyer what the great commandment was, Jesus said:

**And He said to him, " 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' "This is the great and foremost commandment. "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' Matthew 22:37-39 NASB**

Since these are the greatest commandments, it seems logical that God’s wrath would be expressed toward those violating these commandments.

“*Who suppress the truth in unrighteousness*”—the word “*suppress*” here is the Greek word *katecho* which means “*hold the truth*”. It could be translated “hold” in the sense of “believe” or it may mean hold in the sense of “*hold down or suppress*”. In this context it is best translated as suppress. It is present tense and they were doing it in Paul’s day. Who in Paul’s day had the truth but were suppressing it? We saw this all through our study of Acts. **It was Israel, and only Israel!**

[Romans 1:19-23](#) is known among theologians as the classic passage on natural theology. But is Paul teaching that all men are without excuse before God because God is revealed in creation?

**because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Romans 1:19-21 NASB**

Now let me ask you something? Can man come to know God through nature? As man looks at the creation, the earth and heavens, does he realize there is a God and therefore become without excuse before Him? Is this what these verses teach? That is the common interpretation of them.

[Tertullian](#), the early church father said, “*It was not the pen of Moses that initiated the knowledge of the creator. The vast majority of mankind, though they have never heard the name of Moses—to say nothing of his book—know the God of Moses nonetheless. Nature is the teacher; the soul is the pupil.*”

Do men come to know God in any way through looking at nature? What about the scientists who look at the universe through the Hubble telescope? When they see those awesome sights of God’s creation, do they fall down and worship God? They do if they are a Christian. But if they are not Christian, what they worship is the big bang theory.

The late author and astronomer Carl Sagan said, *"The universe is all that ever was and ever will be."* As an astronomer who studied the heavens, he didn't see the glory of God, and matter of fact, he didn't see God at all. Julian Huxley, who was an English evolutionary biologist, said, *"It is all accident, all a matter of chance. No reason, no end, no purpose at all."* These men studied God's creation and they never saw Him or His glory. Natural man says that the matter of which the universe is made somehow over billions of years organized itself into all that we see without any outside assistance or intelligence.

What is called natural or general revelation will not bring anybody to God; just like special revelation won't bring anybody to God. The only way man comes to God is if God draws him to Himself:

**"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. John 6:44 NASB**

**But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. 1 Corinthians 2:14 NASB**

The man without the Spirit cannot appreciate God's glory through the heavens, or through special revelation. God must first effectually call a man, then man can see His glory in creation and in The Word. How much do dead men see of the glory of God?

**For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 1 Corinthians 1:21 NASB**

This verse destroys every variety of "natural revelation" and natural theology: *"The world through its wisdom did not come to know God."* Knowledge of God comes only through his propositional revelation.

Thomas Aquinas taught that Romans 1 was endorsing Aristotle's pagan theory of knowledge called empiricism. But Romans 1 doesn't teach any such thing. It does not teach that men learn truth about God or anything else from sensation. Francis Schaeffer warned the church about Thomas Aquinas and *"nature eating up grace."* By this he meant that if you give "natural revelation" an epistemological inch, it will displace Scripture.

Can natural men, using natural means, derive truth from nature? No, they can't so what are these verses in Romans talking about?

**because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. Romans 1:19 NASB**

*"Because"*—this is the reason for the wrath of God in verse 18. *"Which is known"*—is the Greek word *gnostos*, which means, *"well known."* *"Is evident"* is *phaneroo* which means: *"to make visible, to make known."*

*"God made it evident to them"*—who is the *"them"*? Who did God make Himself visible or known to? In the first 17 verses Paul says, *"you"* and then in verse 19 he says *"them"*, and in verse 20 he says *"they"*. Who are these people that are presently holding the truth in unrighteousness? They had to know the truth to suppress it. This is referring to Israel! The nations had never heard of God.

**"I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. Isaiah 66:19 NASB**

Israel, who knew God, was to take that knowledge to the nations.

**For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 NASB**

Think through this with me. Is it possible that Paul is not talking about the physical creation in this verse? The context here

leads me to believe that he is talking about Israel. Israel is the **“creation.”** The Greek word used here for **“creation”** is [ktisis](#), which is at times used for the physical creation, but it is also used for mankind:

**And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Mark 16:15 NASB**

Here **“creation”** is [ktisis](#), and it is obvious it doesn't mean physical creation. They were to preach to people.

**Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NASB**

Here believers are made a new creation; the church, the body of Christ. We are no longer in the body of Adam, but are new in Christ:

**For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Galatians 6:15 NASB**

**And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. Colossians 1:15 NASB**

So this word [ktisis](#) (ka-tea-seas) does not always mean the physical creation, it is used for men.

In Isaiah 43 we see that Israel was God's creation:

**But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! Isaiah 43:1 NASB**

He seems to be talking here about the creation of the covenant people Israel. So it is possible that “creation” in our text is not referring to the material creation, but to Israel.

**For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 NASB**

Literally this verse reads, *“For the invisibles of Him from the creation of the world, the made has clearly understood being discerned”* The word **“made”** here is [poiema](#) which means, *“a product, thing that is made, workmanship.”* It is only used here and in Ephesians:

**For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 NASB**

Israel was a special creation, the workmanship of God, we see this in:

**"Do you thus repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is not He your Father who has bought you? He has made you and established you. Deuteronomy 32:6 NASB**

**"I am the LORD, your Holy One, The Creator of Israel, your King." Isaiah 43:15 NASB**

These verses tell us that Israel was a special creation of God. Israel was special, God gave them His covenant.

**“His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen”**—when was His eternal power clearly seen? What is the standard of power in the First Testament? It is the Exodus!

**Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Exodus 32:11 NASB**

**'Yet they are Your people, even Your inheritance, whom You have brought out by Your great power and Your outstretched arm.' Deuteronomy 9:29 NASB**

Israel and only Israel had seen His power and received His ordinances:

**and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. Romans 1:32 NASB**

Some see this as Paul retelling the story of the world, creation and the fall. They listened to the voice of the creature rather than the creator. They believe they see echoes of Genesis 3. I guess this is possible, but the context seems to be speaking of Israel.

Look at the first part of verse 21:

**For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. <sup>22</sup> Professing to be wise, they became fools, Romans 1:21-22 NASB**

*"For even though they knew God"*—this verse has always bothered me. I always thought, how did lost mankind know God. Who is this referring to? Is it all men? Do all men know God? No they do not!

**not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 1 Thessalonians 4:5 NASB**

Paul says the Gentiles do not know God. So who is he talking about in Romans 1:21?

Who was it that knew God? It was Israel, and only Israel:

**He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. <sup>20</sup> He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His ordinances, they have not known them. Praise the LORD! Psalms 147:19-20 NASB**

Israel knew God, being in covenant with Him.

*"They did not honor Him as God or give thanks"*—the word *"honor"* here is the Greek [doxazo](#) which means: *"glory."* They knew God but they did not glorify Him. This is why God created man, to give Him glory:

**"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created." Revelation 4:11 NASB**

The nation Israel was created to give God glory and they refused to do it.

**"Has a nation changed gods When they were not gods? But My people have changed their glory For that which does not profit. "Be appalled, O heavens, at this, And shudder, be very desolate," declares the LORD. "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water. Jeremiah 2:11-13 NASB**

Israel exchanged the Glory of God for idols.

**Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets." However, they did not listen, but stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. And they followed vanity and became vain, and went after the nations which surrounded them, concerning which the LORD had commanded them not to do like them. They forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God and made for themselves molten images, even two calves, and made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. 2 Kings 17:13-16 NASB**

*"They did not ...give thanks"*—everything we have comes from the hand of God to not be thankful is a grievous sin. Israel received every benefit from God but was not thankful:

**Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; For the LORD speaks, "Sons I have reared and brought up, But they have revolted against Me. "An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master's manger, But Israel does not know, My people do not understand." Alas, sinful nation, People weighed down with iniquity, Offspring of evildoers, Sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the LORD, They have despised the Holy One of Israel, They have turned away from Him. Isaiah 1:2-4 NASB**

Israel knew God but failed to give Him glory or thanks. Look at verse 23:

**and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Romans 1:23 NASB**

Who did this? It was Israel! Notice what the Psalmist says:

**They made a calf in Horeb, And worshiped a molten image. <sup>20</sup> Thus they exchanged their glory For the image of an ox that eats grass. <sup>21</sup> They forgot God their Savior, Who had done great things in Egypt, Psalms 106:19-21 NASB**

This speaks of Israel in the wilderness swapping the living God for the golden calf.

Look at verse 24:

**Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. Romans 1:24 NASB**

We'll look more at this verse next week, but the Greek word for "*gave them over*" is *paradidomi*, the same Greek word is used in the LXX for God handing Israel over to her enemies. Because they knew God, but turned from Him, God gave them over to judgment!

**"But My people did not listen to My voice; And Israel did not obey Me. <sup>12</sup> "So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, To walk in their own devices. Psalms 81:11-12 NASB**

Look at verse 25:

**For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. Romans 1:25 NASB**

In the Greek here it is "*the lie*." They exchange the truth of God for the lie. Isaiah wrote:

**"I will make justice the measuring line And righteousness the level; Then hail will sweep away the refuge of lies And the waters will overflow the secret place. "Your covenant with death will be canceled, And your pact with Sheol will not stand; When the overwhelming scourge passes through, Then you become its trampling place. Isaiah 28:17-18 NASB**

At the end of Stephen's speech in Acts 7 he says this:

**"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it." Acts 7:51-53 NASB**

Israel had God's law, but they did not keep it. This is the same thing that Paul is talking about in Romans 1.

Romans 1 is not talking about all men having general revelation, it is talking about Israel who alone had special revelation but turned away from the truth they knew. And because they turned from God His wrath was about to be poured out on them.

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