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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles, please to Romans 1:18. We have come to the part I call, "No Excuse!" We all know people who are not too bright. I've decided I don't pick on Aggies and I don't pick on Longhorns or even Baylor Bears, so today I guess I'll make all the Razorback fans mad so I'll just say there were these two Razorbacks who had heard about a \$50 all-inclusive cruise just for Razorback fans. So, one of them said, "I'm going to check it out." He went down there and saw the sign, "Cruise, \$50 for Razorback fans." He walked in, laid down his \$50 and the guy hit him over the head with a stick and knocked him out. The next thing he knew, he woke up floating on an inner tube in a farm pond. That was the cruise. Beside him was another Razorback fan. He turns to him and he asked, "Do they serve food on this cruise?" and the guy said, "They didn't last year." We all know folks who are not too bright, but let me just say today you really need to be somewhat bright to catch what I'm talking about, because it is a rather deep subject. I know sometimes preachers like to be profound or maybe a little obscure because sometimes people think, "Wow, they must be deep because I didn't understand what he said." We have a saying in Alabama, "Just because the river is muddy doesn't mean it is deep." Sometimes people are just obscure instead of deep, but this is a deep topic today.

Have you ever wondered what the eternal destiny is of a person who is born and raised and lives and dies in a place where they never once have access to a Bible, they never hear about God, they never hear the Christian message? What's going to be their eternal destiny? What about a person who is faithful to another religion, say Buddhism or Islam all their lives? Is God going to excuse them? Is God going to excuse those people who never had access to the Bible? This is what this text is all about.

For that reason I am going to have to ask you to pay very close attention. There are some of you who are "thinkers" Sometimes, you come to church and you check your mind at the door and you are never intellectually challenged or stimulated. This message is for those of you who think you never have to think in a message. For those of you who want to hear the pleasant platitudes of the Christian faith, this is a hard message. Some of you aren't going to like it because it is a little over your head. To you, I say, "Raise your head." Others of you aren't going to like it because you are just not going to agree with my conclusions.

I want to start by giving you my conclusions so you won't have to wonder where I am going. The conclusion of the message is, "There is one and only one way to God and that is Jesus Christ" He said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man goes to the father but through me." Now, I've said it before, but either Jesus was telling the truth there or he was a liar, or a lunatic. You cannot say he was just a good man. You have to say he was who he claimed to be, the only access to God, or he was some fool, a farce on the human race. There is no middle ground there. Some of you are going to disagree with that conclusion because some of you think that there are a lot of different ways to God. What is your basis of authority? The basis of authority for what I believe is the Bible. What is your basis of authority if you disagree? Is it your own intellect? That's your prerogative, your choice. You can choose to believe that which is only logical and only rational. The Christian faith is not illogical, it transcends logic. The Christian faith is not rational, nor is it irrational. It is supra-rational. Today I hope every one of you is challenged to think "What do I believe about this, and why do I believe it?"

After introducing the letter in the first 17 verses, Paul jumps in with verse 18 and he dives deep:

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

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

This morning I want to present four propositions about the truth about the reality of God.

I. EVERY PERSON HAS SOME TRUTH (LIGHT)

Every person has some truth, and we'll call that truth, light about God. If you're thinking, "Well, no, that's not true because not everybody has access to a Bible, not everybody has access to a church and they can't hear preaching," I want to do a little role playing at this time. I'd like for all of you in the congregation to imagine you are a person who has lived their your life never reading a Bible, never hearing the gospel, never even have access to a Bible and you die and stand before God, and you say, "Whoa, wait a minute, God. I need an excuse. My excuse is nobody ever told me about you." I'm going to let the choir behind me represent the judgment of God. You're sitting in judgment over the verdict of these people. They say they ought to be excused because they never heard about God. Now, I am going to play the prosecuting attorney, the apostle Paul, and I want to call to the stand two universal witnesses to say to all of you. "Wrong! I told you about God."

1. God's universal witness: Creation

God's first universal witness is Creation. Creation takes the stand and says to everybody on the face of the earth. "Listen, if you paid attention, I was telling you all your life there is a higher power, there is a supreme being, there is a prime mover, there is a first cause. Somebody, something out there is intelligent." Look at verse 20: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, power, nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." That means anyone on the face of the earth, regardless of tribe, culture or race, can stand and look up into a starry sky at night, and say, "Hmm...there has to be somebody out there. There has to be somebody up there. This couldn't have just happened accidentally." The problem with us as Americans is that we have wholeheartedly embraced humanism and evolution that says, "Oh, don't worry about it. It all happened accidentally. It all happened by chance."

Go with me for just a moment up to South Dakota and let's stand before Mount Rushmore and look at those 600-foot sculpted faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. Could you for one moment stand there and say, "Wow, what an accident. It must have been some earthquake a long time ago and those faces were perfectly formed. Or, maybe erosion caused those faces." No, you'd stand there and you'd look and you'd say, "Somebody intelligent designed that and sculpted that." Anybody is smart enough to figure that out. Just look at your watch for a moment. Imagine for one moment your watch or my watch just happened accidentally as the result of an explosion and all the wheels and pins and everything in it just came together accidentally and it keeps time. No. You look at it and say, "Somebody designed it, somebody made it." Well, this is what the Bible is saying, that anybody can look around the world and say, "You know somebody is behind all of this." And that's just the first step.

Put your telescope away and use your microscope. I can't imagine how there can be any atheists in the medical profession when they see the beauty and the intricacy of cells and chromosomes, how human reproduction is something almost mysterious. That's why ancient mankind used to worship it. There is someone intelligent who figured all of this out and set it in motion. That's only step one. There is a Creator.

So, the first witness God calls to the stand is Creation. How can you sit out there and say you ought to be excused because nobody ever told you when all your life Creation was saying to you, "There's a God. Every sunset had God's signature on it. Every flower was God's reality in blossom. Every mountain was God's reality piled up. Every river was God's reality in motion. I've been talking to you all of your life! Why didn't you listen?"

2. God's universal witness: Conscience

Here's witness number two. I call to the stand Conscience, the inward witness. Paul says, "There is another testimony to us that there is a God." Now, in order to understand this, I am going to ask you to turn over one page to Romans 2:14, and we will look into this in much greater detail later, but for right now, I just want you to understand that Paul is arguing for the reality of God based upon a person's conscience. Now, he uses the word "law" several times, and it might help you to understand it if we just substituted the word "Bible" or substituted the words "ethical standard."

Begin reading in verse 4, and I'll substitute the word "Bible." Indeed, when Gentiles who do not have a *Bible* do by nature things required by the *Bible*, they are a *Bible* for themselves, even though they do not have a *Bible*, since they show that the requirements of the *Bible* are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." That means everybody can look without, Creation, there's got to be a God. And then, Paul says, everyone can look *within* and understand they have a conscience. Before the Bible was written, before the Ten Commandments, people knew innately, inherently, it was wrong to kill someone else. They knew it was wrong to steal someone else's possessions, and they knew it was wrong to take another man's wife. There was just something about that which caused moral outrage. Where did they get that sense of right and wrong? Conscience. God gave everyone a conscience.

Someone once said a conscience is like a triangle with three sharp corners. Whenever you do something wrong, a point of the triangle jabs you from the inside, and you feel guilty. How in the world can so many people do so many unconscionable things today? I'll tell you what has happened. People can sin, and sin, and sin, and sin until the sharp corners of a conscience are rounded and worn off until instead of being a triangle there is nothing left but a circle. The Bible mentions people who have had their consciences seared, which means it is like skin burned until there are no nerve endings. There are people today who have rejected their conscience and the testimony of Creation.

So, ladies and gentlemen of the choir, I call upon you to make a verdict. These people say they ought to be excused because they never had a Bible and no one ever told them about God. Are they excused? Well, you may want to say, "Well, okay, I'll excuse you," but may I please call your attention to the last line in verse 20: "so that men are without excuse." Now, that's Proposition number one. Every person has some truth or light about God.

II. LIGHT REFUSED INCREASES DARKNESS

Here's Proposition number two. Light refused increases darkness. Let me demonstrate. Here's a person who looks around and sees Creation, "There's got to be a God! I have a sense of right and wrong. There's got to be somebody who put that there." If they turn toward the light about God, that's great! This scripture is saying people have suppressed the truth. They have rejected the truth about God and turned from the light and moved into darkness. When you turn your back on the light, you go farther and farther into darkness. "Their foolish hearts were darkened."

1. Truth: Use it or lose it

Let me tell you something about spiritual truth: You use it, or you lose it. You use spiritual truth when it is revealed to you, or you lose it. You cannot take truth about God, and put it in your pocket and save it for a rainy day saying, "You know, I think I will save that for a while." Truth about God is like an ice cube on a hot summer day. If you don't use it, it will be gone pretty soon. This passage is talking about people who had the truth about God, but they refused it, and they moved into darkness.

2. A darkened heart produces degenerate habits: a. Image worship

Once your heart turns from God, the next step is wickedness, evil. Then Paul describes it in two ways. He says there are two ways this rejection of the truth has manifested itself, first of all, in idol worship. Look at verse 23 again. It says, "These people exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images [idols] made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." Have you ever wondered how in the world people could bow down before a statue, before a stick, before a bird or before a bug? People around this world worship all of those things. How could they do that? The Bible says it's because they turned from the truth about God and they went into darkness so their foolish hearts became darkened and they started worshiping all of these things.

Those of you who have been to India know starvation is a terrible problem. Thousands are starving and all the while fat cows literally roam free through the streets. They're not eating the cows because the cows are worshiped. How can that be? How can a person die of hunger when right outside their hovel is a cow? They are worshiping the cow, and the problem is people all around this planet have begun worshiping the created things rather than the Creator. That's the next logical step whenever you turn from the light and go into darkness, you start worshiping *created* things.

You may think you're glad we're not like that in America today. We may not worship statues. Instead, we bow down at the altar of success; kneel at the shrine of a career; worship houses and land and possessions, and all of those created things rather than the Creator. We'd better be careful we don't look at God in our smugness and say, "God, at least we are not into idolatry." The New Testament says, "Covetousness or greed is idolatry." If there is anything or anyone in your life more important than God, that's idolatry. That's the first way it manifests itself.

b. Sexual impurity

He goes on to say, "in sexual immorality." Where did sexual immorality ever come from? Because people rejected the truth about God. Look at verse 24. "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." If this sermon doesn't make you angry, next Sunday's really will, because I'll preach on verses 26 and 27, which speak about homosexuality. It's not politically correct and some people aren't going to like it but the Bible talks about how sexual immorality is just one of the ways the darkened heart manifests itself.

How can there be the sexual immorality we have today? It's nothing new. The culture Paul preached and ministered to was at least as immoral as ours today. Sometimes we think it's worse than it's ever been, but it's really not. It's always been there. Some of you have been to Pompeii, the city preserved by volcanic ash from a Mt. Vesuvius eruption. The ash covered the whole city and packed it and preserved it in ash. Archaeologists who have uncovered it know there are sections of Pompeii that are so obscene and so pornographic they are closed to the public. That was the culture Paul was writing about. It's the same today in America. The reason there is so much sexual immorality today in America is simply because of what Paul's talking about, people have turned from the light about God and they have gone deeper and deeper into darkness. That's Proposition number two.

III. LIGHT OBEYED INCREASES LIGHT

Here's Proposition number three. Light obeyed increases light. You see what I said while ago, if you turn from the light, darkness increases, but if any person turns toward the light, they get more light, and they get closer and closer to God. I want to give you some examples. I could give you a lot of examples, but let me give you two from the Bible and one from contemporary life.

1. Example: Acts 8, Ethiopian man

In Acts 8, there is the example of the Ethiopian man. He was from northern Africa who, no doubt, looked up and thought there must be a Creator, knew because of conscience there had to be someone out there, so he started turning toward the light and seeking God. In Acts, chapter 8, we discover he has gone to Jerusalem, although he is not a Jew, and has obtained a copy of the scroll of Isaiah, searching for God. He was riding in a chariot in the desert going back to northern Africa, wondering, "God show yourself to me. I need to know about you." Meanwhile, a Christian by the name of Philip was preaching in Samaria. An angel woke him up and said, "Philip, get up. Get up! God's sending you down in the desert because there is a man who is following the light and you need to tell him the full truth about Jesus." So, Philip gets up and goes out to the desert. They have a divine rendezvous. Philip hops up in the chariot, and tells him about Jesus. Well, the Ethiopian got excited as they were driving along, and he said, "Well, there's some water there, can I get baptized?" Philip says, "If you believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God, you can be baptized." He was baptized. And the Ethiopian eunuch went to northern Africa rejoicing. When the first so-called missionaries reach northern Africa a few years later, there were already Christians there. Where do you think they came from? The Ethiopian was a man who was a God fearer following the light and God gave him the full truth.

2. Example: Acts 10, Cornelius

Here's another example. Acts, chapter 10. Go home and read it for yourself. There is this guy by the name of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman soldier. He was a centurion, in fact. I can imagine one night on sentry duty, he looks up into the star-filled skies and he thinks, God, I know you are out there somewhere. Tell me the truth about who you are. For many years after that he is seeking God. He wants to know God. When we read about him in Acts, chapter 10, listen to how he is described. "He's already a man who prays regularly, but he is not a Christian. He's already a man who fasts several times during the week, and he's not a Christian. He's a man who does alms, good deeds to the poor, yet he's not a Christian. He believes in God, but he is not a Christian. So, one day he is praying, "Oh God, I really want to know the truth about you, and so an angel comes to him and says, "Don't worry, Cornelius, there is a guy down in Joppa by the name of Peter, Simon Peter. He'll tell you the truth. Send a couple of your soldiers down there and fetch him up here to Caesarea." So, Cornelius sends a couple of soldiers down there. Actually, God had more trouble with the messenger than he did with the message because Peter said, "I don't want to go. He's a Gentile, I'm a Jew. I can't go in his house." God had to give him a vision, and he showed Peter that God is no respecter of persons, that the good news is for everybody on planet earth, so finally Peter goes up there, tells Cornelius about Jesus, and Cornelius and all of his family are saved. That's example number two.

3. Example: Africa, Accident Baptist Church

Example number three is a true story that happened in 1992 in Tanzania, Africa. This is documented in our Southern Baptist Convention magazine. Rob Moore, one of our Southern Baptist missionaries, was driving out in the bush in his 4-wheel-drive vehicle along with a native African pastor. They were miles and miles away from home base, and had never been in that part of Africa before. It was a dusty road, and there was a truck in front of them throwing up a lot of dust. They had seen hardly any oncoming traffic, but suddenly out of the dust cloud in front of them was a car. There was no time to stop or turn, and there was a head-on collision—right there,

in Africa. Well, because Rob and the native pastor were wearing seat belts, they were not badly hurt, but the five Africans in the other car were injured. So, Rob and the pastor started trying to administer medical help to these people, but knew they needed to be hospitalized. It took a long time, but someone finally arrived who could transport them to a hospital.

Rob and the African pastor were kneeling down praying for the injured people. When they learned the injuries were not life-threatening, Rob and this other guy started singing praises and were praying thanksgiving to the Lord. Meanwhile, unknown to them, three African men walked out of the bush, watching this missionary and this man. When the injured people were transported away, the three men from a neighboring tribe introduced themselves. They were tribal leaders and they said, "Some time ago, we became convinced that there was only one true Spirit, so we denounced the Shamanism and the magic arts of our ancestors, and we set out to find this one true Spirit. Now, we have come to you. So, Rob Moore and the African pastor started telling them about Jesus. Rob waited there with his 4-wheel drive until somebody could tow it away. It took him 48 hours to get somebody to tow his vehicle away.

Meanwhile, fifteen of tribesmen were led to faith in Jesus Christ, because there was a car accident. Today there is a vibrant church there, and the name of the church in Swahili is, *Ca ni sa la a joli*, which means *Accident Baptist Church*. I am here to tell you, it was no accident. It was what I talked about, a divine rendezvous of God. Here were these three men true to the light they had, seeking God. Sometimes it may take a car wreck, sometimes it may take God causing a planeload of missionaries to crash in the midst of people who are seeking God, but listen to me, here is the final thing I want to say about this point:

4. Anyone, anywhere who follows the light they have can find the full truth about God!

Regardless of their ethnic background, their language, their history, any person on earth whether in the deepest, darkest part of Africa or the most remote point of a polar icecap, *anybody* who seeks the truth about God will find the full truth. And that full truth is in Jesus.

IV. PEOPLE WILL BE JUDGED ACCORDING TO THE LIGHT THEY HAD

Here's Proposition number four. People will be judged according to the light that they have. I question why God allowed me to be born in America instead of some other place. I haven't figured it out. Did you know according to Jesus, there are going to be degrees of punishment when judgment time comes around? Look at Matthew 11. He's talking about the city of Capernaum that was the home base of his ministry for 3½ years. He says, "And you Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom," it would have remained to this day." In other words, he says elsewhere, they would have repented. "But, I tell you it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you." Did you catch that? Here's the this evil, wicked city God destroyed by fire in the Old Testament and here's Capernaum, this wonderful, beautiful, thriving New Testament city that was the base of Jesus' ministry, and because Jesus did miracles in this city and preached the good news in this city, this city had much more light than Sodom. So, for Sodom to reject God is one thing. They didn't have much light, but for Capernaum to reject God with all the light that they had, their punishment was going to be terrible.

Whenever I take a group to Israel, and we stand at the ruins of Capernaum, people wonder why isn't it a city today. Tiberius, up the road, is a thriving city. Nazareth, over the hill, is a thriving city. Cana is a thriving city. Why is Capernaum nothing but a bunch of ruins? They had more light than anybody else, and they rejected it.

1. Wrong question: How will God judge the pagan who never heard the gospel?

That's the wrong question, so don't worry about that, because it's not up to you, it's not up to me—it's up to God. But I think there is clear indication in the scripture God not only knows who repents, God also knows who would have repented if they had the truth. That's what he said about Sodom.

2. Right question: How will God judge an American who heard it many times?

Here's the right question, and this is the one we all ought to consider, "How will God judge an American—or East Texan, or Tylerite—How will God judge an American who has heard it many times?" Forget about the pagan in Africa for just a moment. How is God going to deal with people here in East Texas, a land where there is a church on every corner, there is a Bible in every hotel room, there are Christian book stores. You can turn on your radio or television and hear the gospel. Most people in America have heard it many times. People are going to be judged according to the light that they have.

CONCLUSION

It was 1888 in a little city in the northwest corner of Alabama nestled on the great Tennessee River named Tusculumbia. A beautiful, healthy little girl was born to a little family. She was normal in every way. When she was 18 months old, she contracted a terrible disease and infection left her totally blind, totally deaf and because of that she could not speak. Thus began her challenge. In the 19th century, people who were deaf and dumb were still considered idiots. They spent most of their lives in insane asylums, but the girls parents hoped for better things for her, so they hired a 17-year-old school teacher to instruct her. Because Braille had not yet been spread around the globe, there was really no way for blind people to communicate. So they devised a little sign language they could put in the girl's hand so she could understand it. The girl later became a highly respected, intelligent woman who wrote many books, toured the world and was considered a great thinker and a celebrity. When she was in her late teens, her parents, who were committed Christians, wanted a preacher to tell her the truth about Jesus. So, they brought a prominent preacher into their home and through someone signing in her hand, he told her about God and about Jesus Christ. When he finished, it is said that Helen Keller smiled a brilliant smile, and signed, "Oh, I know him. I've known him for many years. I just did not know his name. Thank you for telling me the full truth." Isn't it amazing!

Anybody, anywhere who follows the light that they have, can find the truth!

OUTLINE

I. EVERY PERSON HAS SOME TRUTH (LIGHT)

God's two universal witnesses:

1. Creation - look around
2. Conscience - look within

II. LIGHT REFUSED INCREASES DARKNESS

1. Truth: Use it or lose it
2. A darkened heart produces degenerate habits:
 - a. Image worship
 - b. Sexual impurity

III. LIGHT OBEYED INCREASES LIGHT

Examples:

1. Acts 8 - Ethiopian man
2. Acts 10 - Cornelius
3. Africa - Accident Baptist Church
4. Anyone, anywhere who follows the light they have can find the full truth about God!

IV. PEOPLE WILL BE JUDGED ACCORDING TO THE LIGHT THEY HAD

"And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you." *Matthew 11:23-24*

1. Wrong question: How will God judge the pagan who never heard the gospel?
2. Right question: How will God judge an American who heard it many times?