

***The Guilt of the Pagan:  
A Sermon***

by

**William G. T. Shedd, D.D.**

***"They are without excuse; because that when they knew God, they glorified him not as God . . . And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind." — Romans 1:20,21,28***

Unless the *guilt* of the pagan world can be proved, the missionary enterprises of the Christian church, from the days of the Apostles to the present time, have all been a waste of labor. Nay more, if the sin and ill-desert of the entire human race, in all its generations, cannot be established, then the Christian religion itself, involving the incarnation of God, is an attempt to supply a demand that has no real existence. Both theoretical and practical Christianity stands or falls with the doctrine of the universal guilt of man. It is no wonder, therefore, that the apostle Paul, in the opening of the most systematic and logical treatise in the New Testament—the Epistle to the Romans—enters upon a line of argument to demonstrate the ill-desert of every human creature without exception, and to prove that before an unerring tribunal and in the final day of adjudication "every mouth must be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God" (Rom. 3:19).

In conducting his argument the apostle relies upon two facts, in particular, to establish his position. The first is that however dim or imperfect man's knowledge of God and the moral law may be, he nevertheless knows more than he puts in practice. Of the millions of idolaters in cultivated Greece and Rome and the millions of idolaters in that barbaric world which lay outside of the Græco-Roman civilization, he affirms that they "are without excuse; because that when they *knew* God, they glorified him not as God." And the second fact upon which he founds his charge of guilt is that the dim perception of God and the moral law, as well as the idolatrous notions that were formed upon these subjects, both alike originated in the wicked inclination of the heart. These pagans, he says, "*did not like* to retain God in their knowledge," and, therefore, "God gave them over to a reprobate mind."

The apostle vindicates the ways of God in the condemnation of man because human conscience, be it much or little, is always in advance of human character; and, also because all the various forms of human error respecting the divine being and attributes, all the idolatry and superstition of the barbaric races of mankind, originate not in man's created and rational constitution but in the sin of the apostate and corrupt heart. These two facts, in the judgment of St. Paul, justify the damnation of the heathen; and to their examination we now proceed, under the light of St. Paul's inspiration and reasoning.

I. The idea of God is the most important and comprehensive of all the ideas of which the human mind is possessed. It is the foundation of religion, of all right doctrine, and all right conduct. A correct intuition of it leads to correct religious theories and practice, while any erroneous or defective view of the Supreme Being will pervade the whole domain of religion and exert a most pernicious influence upon the character and conduct of men. It is this great idea of the Deity, inborn and constitutional to the human mind, which St. Paul seizes, and he flashes its penetrating light into the recesses of the pagan heart. He traces back the horrible depravity of the heathen world, which he depicts with a pen as sharp as that of Juvenal, but with none of Juvenal's bitterness and vitriolic sarcasm, to a distorted and false conception of the divine being and attributes.

But he does not for an instant concede that this distorted and false conception is founded in the original structure and constitution of the human soul, and that this moral ignorance is necessary and inevitable to the pagan. This mutilated idea of the Supreme Being was not inlaid in the rational creature on that morning of creation, when God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." On the contrary, the apostle affirms that in the moral constitution of a rational soul, and in the works of creation and providence, the Creator has given to all men the media to a correct idea of himself, and asserts, by implication, that if they had always employed these media they would have always possessed this idea.

"The wrath of God," he says, "is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness, *because*, that which may be known of God is manifest *in* them, for God has showed it unto them. *For* the invisible things of Him, even His eternal power and godhead, are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood by the things that are made, so that they are without excuse; *because* that when they *knew* God they glorified him not as God" (Rom. 1:18-21).

This is said, be it remembered, of the pagan world; and from this reasoning it appears that the pagan mind has not kept what was committed to it. It has not employed the moral instrumentalities nor elicited the moral truth with which it has been furnished. This reasoning implies that the pagan man by his constitutional structure knows more of his Maker than he puts in practice; that he possesses a talent which he hides in the earth; that he has a pound which he keeps laid up in a napkin.

When Napoleon was returning from his campaign in Egypt and Syria, he was seated one night upon the deck of the vessel under the open canopy of the heavens, surrounded by his captains and generals. The conversation had taken a skeptical direction, and most of the party had combated the doctrine of the Divine Existence. Napoleon sat silent and musing, apparently taking no interest in the discussion, when suddenly raising his hand and pointing at the crystalline firmament crowded with its mildly-shining planets and its keen glittering stars, he broke out in those startling tones that so often electrified a million of

men, "Gentlemen, who made all that?" The "eternal power and godhead" of the Creator are impressed by "the things that are made," and these words of Napoleon to his atheistic captains silenced them. . . .

But it will be objected that it is a very dim and inadequate idea of the Deity that thus rises in the pagan's mind, and that, therefore, the apostle's affirmation that he is "without excuse" for being an idolater and a sensualist needs some qualification. This imbruted creature, says the objector, certainly does not possess the metaphysical conception of God as a Spirit, and of all his various attributes, like the dweller in Christendom. How then can he be brought in guilty before the same eternal bar and be condemned to the same eternal death with the nominal Christian?

The answer is plain and decisive, and derivable out of the apostle's own statements. In order to establish the guiltiness of a rational creature before the bar of God, it is not necessary to show that he has lived in the seventh heavens and under a blaze of moral intelligence like that of the archangel Gabriel. It is only necessary to show that he has enjoyed *some* degree of moral light, and that *he has not lived up to it*. Any creature who knows more than he practices is a guilty creature. If the light in the pagan's intellect concerning God and the moral law, small though it be, is yet actually in advance of the inclination and affections of his heart and the actions of his life, he deserves to be punished like any and every other creature under the divine government of whom the same thing is true.

Grades of knowledge vary indefinitely. No two men upon the planet, no two men in Christendom itself, possess precisely the same degree of moral intelligence. There are men walking the streets of this city today under the full light of the Christian revelation, whose notions respecting God and law are exceedingly dim and inadequate; and there are others whose views are clear and accurate in a high degree. But there is not a person in this city— young or old, ignorant or cultivated, in the purlieu of vice or in the saloons of wealth— whose knowledge of God is not in advance of his character. Ask the young thief in the subterranean haunts of vice and crime if he does not know more of moral truth than he puts in practice; and if he renders an honest answer, it is in the affirmative. Ask the most besotted soul, immersed and petrified in pleasure, if his career upon earth has been in accordance with his own knowledge and conviction of what is right and required by his Maker, and he will answer no, if he answers truly. This is the condemnation, that light (in varying degrees it is true, but always in some degree) falls upon the pathway of every man, but he loves darkness rather than light because his heart and deeds are evil [cf. John 3:19].

And this principle will be applied to the pagan world in the day of the great winding up of human history. It is so applied by St. Paul. He himself concedes that the Gentile has not enjoyed all the advantages of the Jew, and argues that the ungodly Jew will be visited with a more severe punishment than the ungodly Gentile. But he expressly affirms that *the pagan is under law*, and *knows* that he is; that he shows the work of the law that is written in

his heart, his conscience also bearing witness, and his thoughts the meanwhile accusing him (Rom. 2:15). But the knowledge of the law implies the knowledge of God in an equal degree. Who can feel himself amenable to a moral law without at the same time thinking of its Author? The law and the Lawgiver are indivisible. The one is the mirror and index of the other. If the eye opens dimly upon the commandment, it opens dimly upon the Sovereign. If it sees eternal right and law with clear and celestial vision, it then looks directly into the face of God.

Law and God are correlative to each other. And just so far, consequently, as the heathen understands the law that is written on the heart, does he apprehend the Being who sits upon the circle of the heavens and who impinges himself upon the consciousness of man. This being so, it is plain that we can confront the ungodly pagan with the same charge of guilt before the Eternal Judge with which we confront the ungodly nominal Christian. We can tell him with positiveness, wherever we find him, . . . that he knows more than he puts in practice. We will concede to him that the quantum of his moral knowledge is very stinted and meager. But in the same breath we will remind him that, small as it is, he has not lived up to it, that he too has "come short," that he too, knowing God in the dimmest, faintest degree, has yet not glorified him as God in the slightest, faintest manner.

The Bible sends the ungodly and licentious pagan to hell upon the same principle that it sends the ungodly and licentious nominal Christian. It is the just principle enunciated by our Lord Christ, the judge of quick and dead, when he says, "He who knew his master's will [clearly], and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes; and he who knew not his master's will [clearly, but knew it dimly], and did it not, shall be beaten with few stripes."<sup>1</sup> It is the just principle enunciated by St. Paul, that "as many as have sinned without law [*ἀνόμως*, without *written* law] shall also *perish* without law" (Luke 12:47,48; Rom. 2:12).

....

II. And this brings us to the consideration of the second fact upon which St. Paul rests his position that the pagan world is in a state of condemnation. He concedes that man outside of the pale of revelation is characterized, not indeed by *total*, but by great ignorance of God and divine things; that his moral knowledge is exceedingly dim and highly distorted. But the fault is in himself that it is so. "As they *did not like to retain God in their knowledge*, God gave them over to a reprobate mind."

. . . Light that is abused ministers to a greater condemnation . . . If the heathen knew nothing at all of his Maker and his duty, he could not be held responsible and would not be summoned to judgment. As St. Paul affirms, "Where there is no law, there is no transgression." But if when he knew God in some degree he glorified him not as God to that degree, and if when the moral law was written upon his heart he went counter to its

---

1 Brackets original.

requirements and actually heard the accusing voice of his own conscience after so doing, then his mouth must be stopped and he must become guilty before his Judge, like any and every other disobedient creature.

It is this serious and damning fact in the history of man upon the globe that St. Paul brings to view in the affirmation that the pagan world "*did not like to retain* God in their knowledge." He accounts for all the idolatry and sensuality, all the darkness and vain imaginations of paganism by referring them to *the aversion of the natural heart*. The primary difficulty was in the affections of the pagan and not in his understanding. He knew too much for his own comfort in sin. The contrast between the divine purity that was mirrored in his conscience, and the sinfulness that was wrought into his heart and will, rendered this inborn constitutional idea of God a painful one. It was a fire in the bones.

If the Psalmist, a renewed man (yet not entirely free from human corruption), could say, "I thought of God and was troubled," much more must the totally depraved man of paganism be filled with terror when, in the thoughts of his heart, in the hour when the accusing conscience was at work, he brought to mind the one great God of gods, the vast unseen Power whom he did not glorify and whom he had offended. It was no wonder, therefore, that he did not like to retain the idea of such a being in his consciousness, and that he adopted all possible expedients to get rid of it.

The apostle informs us that the pagan actually called in his *imagination* to his aid in order to extirpate, if possible, all his native and rational ideas and convictions upon religious subjects. He became vain in his imaginations, and his foolish heart, as a consequence, was darkened; and he changed the glory of the incorruptible God, the spiritual unity of the Deity, into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things (Rom. 1:21-23). He invented idolatry, and all those "gay religions full of pomp and gold," in order to blunt the edge of that sharp, spiritual conception of God, which was continually cutting and lacerating his wicked and his sensual heart. . . .

The first step in the process of mutilating the original idea of God as a unity and an invisible Spirit is seen in those pantheistic religions which lie behind all the mythologies of the ancient world . . . God becomes a vague impersonal power with no moral qualities and no religious attributes . . . .

And the second and last stage in the process of vitiating the true idea of God appears in that polytheism in the midst of which St. Paul lived and labored and preached and died; in that seductive and beautiful paganism, that classical idolatry, which still addresses the human taste in such a fascinating manner in the Venus de Medici and the Apollo Belvidere. The idea of the unity of God is now mangled and cut up into the "gods many" and the "lords many;" into the thirty thousand divinities of the pagan pantheon.

This completes the process. God now gives his guilty creature over to those vain

imaginings of naturalism, sensualism, and idolatry, and to an increasingly darkening mind, until in the lowest forms of heathenism he so distorts and suppresses the concreated idea of the Deity that some speculatists assert that it does not belong to his constitution, and that his Maker never endowed him with it.

An excerpt from *The Guilt of the Pagan: A Sermon* by William G. T. Shedd (Boston: Missionary House, 1866). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided. Original footnotes are not included.