



# Sermon Transcript

## September 27, 2020

The Gospel  
It Starts with God  
Romans 1:18-23



This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 27, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com)

**Sermon Text**  
**Romans 1:18-23**

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> And exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

## Introduction

We are using Romans 1-5 to put together the message of the gospel. We noted last week that the gospel is the theme of the book of Romans. The gospel is at the heart of the book of Romans because the gospel is at the heart of Paul and the gospel is at the heart of Paul because the gospel is at the heart of God. In the opening verse of the book of Romans, Romans 1:1, Paul describes the gospel as *the gospel of God*. Through the gospel *the righteousness of God is revealed*. In other words, the gospel tells us how we can be made right with God. It tells us how we can have relationship with the living God. So this morning we start our journey through the gospel by starting with God.

The gospel asserts that you can't really understand who you are if you don't start with God. The gospel asserts that you can't truly find yourself until you find God. That is what Jesus meant when he said in Matthew 10:39, "*Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life, for my sake, will find it.*" What he is saying here is that we don't find ourselves by looking within ourselves. Rather, we find ourselves by coming into right relationship with the one who made us. It all starts with God.

Francis Shaeffer called this the "dilemma of man."<sup>1</sup> He rightly recognized that we are finite. We are limited. We are here today and we are gone tomorrow. Our finite nature causes us to wonder where we find meaning in this life. We often try to find our meaning in things that are temporary. This is the dilemma you find in the book of Ecclesiastes. Here is Solomon the king who had everything this world could offer him. He had power and riches and wisdom and pleasures and he was endowed with great skills and he prospered through the work of his hands . . . and yet taking it all in he was aware of how finite and fleeting it all is and so he said it was like chasing the wind.

I kind of felt that way a few years ago when I read an editorial in the *Hartford Courant*. It was written by Judge Robert Satter and he was reflecting on what it was like to turn 90 years of age. He was looking back on his life and reflecting on the things he enjoyed: his family, his career, his hobbies and his Red Sox. (This was written in 2009 and so he got to see what many in his generation didn't live long enough to see—two World Series championships!) And yet, the finite nature of this man's life—albeit a good and full and productive life of 90 plus years—was captured when he quoted Thomas Wolfe, "this wonderful and unique "I" that never was before and never will be again." He said, "Internally, I am a bundle of memories of people I've known, events I've experienced, books I've read and poems I can still recite. More and more I live in that interior space, recalling the past. When I die, that presence and circuitry will

vanish . . . In the end, . . . I will pass and be forgotten like the rest.”<sup>2</sup> That is what the book of Ecclesiastes was saying. Life is fleeting. If I am the starting point of my life, then there is no ultimate meaning. That is what the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre concluded as a result of believing that we are all here by chance. He said, “I was thinking that here we are eating and drinking, to preserve our precious existence, and that’s there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing”<sup>3</sup>

And so Francis Shaeffer said that the only way something finite can have any meaning is if it is connected to something infinite, something greater than itself. That is the conclusion of Ecclesiastes as well. The preacher concludes in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “*The end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*” Purpose and meaning in life is found in knowing God. It is the gospel that tells us how we can be right with God and how we can know God and thus how we can find ourselves. And so as we begin walking through the gospel, we need to recognize that it all starts with God.

Here is what I would like to do over the next several weeks. I am going to use Romans 1-5 to walk through the gospel. That means I will bounce around a little bit through these five chapters. For example, right out of the gate this morning we encounter the wrath of God. The first statement in our passage says “*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.*” I am not going to talk about the wrath of God this morning. It is not that I am avoiding the subject because in two weeks that will be the focus of the message. Rather, this morning I want to establish the fact that **God is our starting point and that we cannot find ourselves apart from finding God.**

As we make our way through Romans 1-5, I am going to use a series of pictures to help us keep things together over the next several weeks. These pictures come from the gospel presentation *Two Ways to Live*.<sup>4</sup> Last week in the Q & A after the service someone asked the question: “What is your two minute gospel testimony? Your example would be very helpful to me when someone leaves me an opening to discuss my faith.” That is a great question. These drawings are what I use when I sit down to share the gospel with someone. I can take two minutes or twenty minutes to share it. Often at the end of my presentation, the person asks if they can take the drawings with them (it is not for the art work!) That is one of the goals of going through this series. It is to give you a tool to help you share your faith. I would love to challenge you to take the drawing each week and ask a friend if you could share it with them to help you learn how to share your faith. Let me know how it goes if you give it a try.

But I also hope that there are people journeying with us who are curious or even skeptical of the gospel. Either way, it is my prayer that I would clearly present to you what it means for us when we say *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . . for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.”* **God is our starting point and we cannot find ourselves apart from finding God.**



## Finding the God who is there

Whenever I share the gospel with someone, I begin with this phrase: There is a God. That is how the Bible begins. It begins with this basic assertion, *“In the beginning God.”* What do we know about this God who is there?

For starters, Paul tells us that God is *from heaven*. In verse 18 he says, *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.”* When we read that God is *from heaven* or when we read passages that tell us that God is a God *on high* we are not saying that God is far and distant from us. We are not saying that God is removed from us as if he is “all the way out there, somewhere, in heaven, wherever that is.” Instead, J. I. Packer says it means that “God is far above us in greatness.”<sup>5</sup> God is *on high*. God is *of heaven*. Micah 6:6 puts it this way, *“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?”* Here Micah is recognizing the sheer greatness of God. How do I enter the presence of this holy and majestic God? Often coupled with *heaven* is the throne of God, and that seems to be part of what we see in our passage this morning, the place of God’s judgment. Psalm 11:4 says *“The LORD’s throne is in heaven.”* Again, it is not so much telling us where God’s throne is, but instead it is affirming that God is the Judge, the Ruler, the King and we are accountable to him.

When we say that we believe in God we are not just confessing to believe in the existence of a supernatural being. When the survey comes out asking people whether they believe in God, I often feel that many people are confessing belief is some kind of nebulous higher power that remains undefined and is way out there somewhere. But that is not what we know about God from the Bible. The God who is there, the God who is our starting point is majestic. The word *majesty* is a word often used in the Bible to describe the greatness of God. Psalm 145:5 says, *“On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works I will meditate.”* Because God is majestic, *“the Great God, the Great King”* we represent him with a crown and we heed the invitation of Psalm 95:6, *“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.”*

There is another thing that Paul says in our passage about God that emphasizes God's majesty and greatness. In verse 22 he refers to *the glory of the immortal God*. And notice how he contrasts God's glory to man. He refers to man as *mortal*. This speaks to the vast difference between God and man. There is no one like God. Paul says it this way in 1 Timothy 6:15-16, *he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, who no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion.*" This is what Francis Schaeffer was getting at when he said that the finite can only find meaning if it is connected to something that is infinite. God is immortal. God is our starting point. He is the source of all things.

If you want to meditate on the sheer greatness and majesty of God, I suggest you read Psalm 139. Here the psalmist asks, *"Where can I go from your presence?"* There is no place you can go where God is not. Not only is God present everywhere, God knows everything about you. He knows when you stand and when you sit. He knows your ways. *Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O LORD.* This is the infinite God who is our starting point. J. I. Packer confessed, "Living becomes an awesome business when you realize you spend every moment in the sight and company of an all-knowing and ever-present God."<sup>6</sup>

Charles Spurgeon was a pastor in England during the 1800's. He said this in a sermon he preached in 1855. He began, "It has been said by someone that the proper study of mankind is man. I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God . . . The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father." Here is how he ends his introduction to his sermon: "I know nothing which can so comfort the soul, so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief, so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of God."<sup>7</sup> This is the infinite God who is there. I am afraid that in many ways our impression of God is way too small. He is of heaven. He is immortal. He is our starting point. There is a God.

### **Finding the God who is speaking**



What we learn in our passage this morning is that the majestic God who is there is not a God who is hidden from us. It is quite the contrary. God is speaking. In our passage this morning it is suggested that he is speaking rather plainly. He is speaking rather clearly. The impression Paul gives us is that if you are having problems

hearing God it is not for the lack of God speaking. Instead Paul says that the problem rests with us. In verse 19 Paul says that what God has shown us about himself is *plain to see*. He says in verse 20 that God is speaking so clearly that we can't blame God if we don't hear him. Instead, he says, we are left *without excuse*. In our passage this morning, Paul is talking about God our Creator. Through what God has made we should be able to hear God saying that there is a God and he is powerful. God is the loving ruler of the world. He made the world and all that is in it.

Now we all know that there are people who look at the material world and conclude that there is no God. Carl Sagan was a renowned scientist and astronomer and he looked at the physical world and the vast heavens and he concluded what is now a famous line, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." This is a direct contrast to what Christians confess in the singing of the *Gloria Patri*. "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen." One looks at the heavens and says, "this is all there is." Another looks at the heavens and to them it *declares the glory of God*.

I can't prove to anyone that God exists. Nor can anyone prove that God doesn't exist. Rather, we are all left pondering the question, "why is there something and not nothing?" That is what philosophers call "the problem of existence." How do you explain the existence of this world? And more personally, how do you explain your own existence? While I can't prove God to you, I can look at the created order and see the many clues that loudly declare to us that there is a God and he is powerful.

The physicist Stephen Hawking wrote, "Almost everyone now believes that the universe, and time itself, had a beginning at the Big Bang."<sup>8</sup> Francis Collins, a Christian scientist agrees with that thought and it leads him to say, "That implies that before that, there was nothing. I can't imagine how nature, in this case the universe, could have created itself. And the very fact that the universe had a beginning implies that someone was able to begin it."<sup>9</sup> That is what Paul is saying about God speaking through creation. The things that have been made speak to *the divine nature*. Paul says that it leaves you saying, "there must be a God who brought about all that there is."

Carl Sagan liked to refer to the earth as "that dot" in the vast universe. He said it is "a small stage in a vast cosmic arena." He said, "The earth is the only world known so far to harbor life."<sup>10</sup> In fact, science tells us that all the constants of the universe are finely tuned for life. While Hawking was an atheist, he said that the odds against a universe like ours existing are enormous. And he went on to say, "I think there are clearly

religious implications.”<sup>11</sup> This is one of the ways the Bible demonstrates how creation speaks to the power of God. It is a power that never runs out. Paul refers to God’s power as *his eternal power*. His battery never needs to be recharged. It is a constant that is on display in what he has made and how he sustains all things.

This is the point behind Isaiah 40. He is writing to a group of people who are despairing over the events of life. You could say that their batteries are running low. They are despondent. That has been a common feeling in our current reality we have come to know as 2020. Everywhere I turn, people are confessing that their batteries are running low. I get that. I feel that too. But into that context, God reminds them that his power is eternal and never ending. God reminds them of his power by appealing to what he has made. He begins by asking, “*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?*” Later, he calls them to look at the stars and consider the heavens. “*Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.*” To what end is he telling us this about God and his eternal power? He is inviting us to turn to him for our strength. He has an endless supply of power. He says that the one who turns to this God *shall renew their strength*. God does not grow weary and this powerful God gives *power to the faint*. He is there and he is not silent. The gospel begins by telling us that there is a God who is our Creator. He is powerful and he is calling out to you through what he has made. Can you hear him?

## Finding the God who can be found



We said at the beginning of the sermon that **God is the starting point and we can’t find ourselves apart from finding God**. But the message of the gospel is that the God who is there and the God who is speaking has made us to know him. St. Augustine said it rather famously when he said of man, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>12</sup> We were made by God and we were made for God. James K. A. Smith explained what Augustine meant with his famous saying. He said, “In other words, to be truly and fully human, we need to “find” ourselves in relationship to the One who made us and for whom we are made.”<sup>13</sup>

For those of you who were with us for our journey through the Bible this past year, a journey called CASEKT EMPTY, at the beginning of the story, C—Creation—we saw how God places the two trees in the center of the Garden of Eden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat of the



tree of the knowledge of good evil and Adam was warned that if he ate of that tree he would die. What is that about? Well for starters, the tree is at the center of the Garden because as Carol Kaminski reminded us “this command is central to life with God. Human beings are to trust in God and obey his voice; in doing so they honor him as God.”<sup>14</sup> This is how life was meant to be lived. This is how you find yourself. Otherwise we die. Otherwise we find ourselves alienated from God, from our fellow man and from ourselves. And so in our picture we see that God who created the world created man in his image and man was created to know God and to have relationship with God. So to be fully human and to live out God’s design for our lives we are to live our lives under God’s good rule. This is how we flourish.

As we will see in the unfolding message of the gospel, because of Jesus, God can still be found. And we see in our passage this morning that we were made to know him. In verse 21 it says, “*though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.*” Next week we will talk about what has gone wrong in our world and why God seems so distant to us. But for now, I want you to see how Paul talks about man having known God and that finding God and knowing God is found in rightly relating to God. It is found in worshiping God. It is found in giving thanks to God upon whom we humbly depend. As Proverbs says, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.*”

A few years ago, Taylor Swift came out with a song called “Out of the Woods.” Like many of her songs, it was a song about a broken relationship. That is Country Music at it’s finest! In the music video for this song she emerges from the dark woods that serve as a metaphor for the dark struggle of this relationship. She emerges from it bruised and muddy. At the end of the video she approaches the back of a pristine version of herself. She reaches out her arm and she puts her hand on this identical woman’s shoulder and immediately the song is over and these words appear on the video:

*She lost him.*

*But she found herself.*

*And somehow that was everything.*

Reflecting on this song, Trevin Wax says, “Why does this song by Taylor Swift resonate with people? Because, deep down, all human beings want to be totally known and totally loved. And the shortcut to being totally known and totally loved is to “know yourself” and “love yourself” – to no longer be dependent on anyone else for your happiness. The end of “Out of the Woods” also appeals to the idea that all our troubles in life are part of a grander story of discovery. “*And somehow that was everything.*” The big story of self-discovery supersedes whatever heartache you’ve experienced.<sup>15</sup>

We do long for a grandeur story and there is one. Remember, in order for the finite to find meaning there needs to be something that is infinite. But that story finds its focus on God, not ourselves. Trevin Wax concludes, “The gospel that calls us out of the woods of sin and brokenness rewrites those final lines of Taylor Swift’s song.

*She lost herself.*

*But she found Him—Jesus*

*And somehow THAT was everything.<sup>16</sup>*

## Conclusion

You were made to know God. And the gospel tells us how we can know him.



Finding the God who is there: God is the loving ruler of the world. He is the God of heaven and the God of glory, who alone is immortal. God is the starting point to your life.



Finding the God who speaks: God made the world and all that is in it.



Through what God has made he telling us that he is there and he has an infinite supply of power to meet your greatest need.



Finding the God who can be found: If God is our starting point then God is the one who tells us how he can be found. As we will see, God is found by repenting of our sin and turning in faith to Jesus who died to forgive us of our sin.

What must I know to live and die in the joy of God’s Comfort?

How great my sin and misery are.

How I am set free from my sin and misery—Jesus.

How I am to give thanks for such deliverance.

God is the starting point and we can’t find ourselves apart from finding God.

*Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. Revelation 4:11*

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- <sup>1</sup>Francis Schaeffer *He Is There And He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1972) 2
- <sup>2</sup>Robert Satter “Turning 90, With My Life In Front of Me” in *The Hartford Courant* August 9, 2009
- <sup>3</sup>Quoted in Tim Keller *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 127
- <sup>4</sup>Two Ways to Live, <https://twowaystolive.com/>
- <sup>5</sup>J. I. Packer *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 83
- <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 86
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 17-18
- <sup>8</sup>Stephen Hawking and Robert Penrose *The Nature of Time and Space* (Princeton University Press, 1996) 20
- <sup>9</sup>In an interview on Salon.com [www.salon.com/books/int/2006/08/07/collins/index2.html](http://www.salon.com/books/int/2006/08/07/collins/index2.html)
- <sup>10</sup>Carl Sagan *Pale Blue Dot: Vision of the Human Future in Space* (Random House, 1994)
- <sup>11</sup>Quoted in Francis Collins *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press, 2006) 75
- <sup>12</sup>Augustine *Confessions* trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 1.1.1
- <sup>13</sup>James K. A. Smith *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016) 8
- <sup>14</sup>Carol M Kaminski *CASKET EMPTY: God’s Plan of Redemption* (Casket Empty Media, 2012) 1
- <sup>15</sup>Trevin Wax “The Gospel According to Tayler Swift” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) January 5, 2016
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*





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# COMMUNITY GROUPS

## Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What commitments do you want to make to each other as you get started this fall?
2. Which of these emotions are you most currently feeling and why?  
Sad      Angry      Scared      Happy      Excited      Tender

## Diving Into The Word

3. Read Romans 1:19-20; Psalm 19:1; Acts 14:17. What does God's creation tells us about God? What do you hear God saying through what he has made?
4. Read Revelation 4:11. If you were sharing your faith with someone, how would you use this portion of the illustration to share what you believe? Work on it as a group.   

5. Read Isaiah 40:28-31 and identify how Isaiah describes the greatness of God. How does knowing this about God give you strength? Where can you apply that to your life right now?
6. Read Romans 1:21. According to this verse, what does it look like to live under God's good rule? What do you think Augustine meant when he said, "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you?"
7. Building off of question #4, how would you use the rest of this illustration to share what you believe?   


## Taking It Home

7. How could you practice sharing your faith this week?
8. As a group develop a prayer list of people you would like to see turn in faith to Jesus.