

Romans Series Slide

Thomas Nagel was the Professor of Philosophy and Law at NYU where he taught from 1980-2016.

He is a highly regarded American philosopher and author of a dozen books published over the span of more than 40 years.

He is also an atheist meaning he doesn't believe God exists.

I want to share with you some of the things he's written in his books.

“Something more is needed to explain how there can be conscious, thinking creatures.”- Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos*

(In other words- human beings)

He says that a mere materialist view of the world (meaning the only thing that really exists is matter...stuff you can touch or see under a microscope)...that a materialist understanding of the world undercuts our confidence in the objective truth of our moral beliefs...and the objective truth of our mathematical and scientific reasoning.

To break that down- Thomas Nagel- an atheist philosopher is saying that if the only real things are what I can see and touch- then I can never tell anyone what they did is wrong...and I can't say that I ever arrived at anything true by using math or science.

I can't say 2 plus 2 equals 4 because I can't see or touch that concept. And I can't see or touch right and wrong...which means I can never say murder or rape or enslaving people is wrong.

But He goes on to say we can't just stop believing in right and wrong...or in math or science...because he says that

“[Knowledge] is based ultimately on common sense and on what is plainly undeniable”

Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos*

So this atheist philosopher says that it is “plainly undeniable”, from observing the material world.. that there is more to the world than the material. Than the natural. Meaning- there is something real that is immaterial....and supernatural.

I know what you're thinking. Why doesn't he just believe in God?

In fact- Nagel says that if he did believe in God- it would explain the things that his materialist scientific theory cant explain- like cognitive awareness and morality....and love. Still- he rejects the existence of God.

Listen to him in his own words- remembering that we are not creatures of reason- that follow the facts to a reasonable conclusion, but creatures of desire- that always seek to justify getting what we want.

“I want atheism to be true...I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.” Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*

That is an emotional, not an intellectual response.

He goes on to admit that the reason he doesn’t want there to be a god is because he doesn’t want to be accountable to a cosmic authority. He wants to live the way he wants to live without being told.

Title Slide- “Plainly Undeniable: Why You Can’t Live for Long in a Godless Universe” Romans 1:18-25 (pg 1450)

Today, in Romans chapter 1- we’re going to see the bad news that we HAVE to come to terms with- if we are going to receive the good news of the gospel.

See what Thomas Nagel admitted in a book...is true of every. single. human being. Whether we have come to realize it or not.

Though the evidence of God is Plainly Undeniable...we live like atheists...because we don’t want to be accountable to a cosmic authority.

Romans 1:18-25

18 For God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, 19 since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse. 21 For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles.

24 Therefore God delivered them over in the desires of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen.

Transition: Today I want to show you 3 things that are hard for a lot of us to believe- but absolutely necessary if we are going to find joy in belonging to God.

First- Its hard for us to believe that everybody has what they need to believe in God.
Second- its hard for us to believe that God would be angry about people not believing in him- so much that they go to hell for it.

Third- Its hard for us to believe that doing what we want and getting what we want would not set us free. Like- why is God such a stickler that we do things his way... seems a little insecure.

Those are the objections that Paul addresses in this section of Romans 1- which- I admit can be a little bit of a bummer...but again- without seeing the dire situation each of us is in...we won't understand how beautiful, profound, and life-saving Jesus actually is.

So let's start with this.

1) We are without excuse because God has not hidden himself from us.

When I say "God has not hidden himself from us" I don't mean that there is some indisputable proof necessarily that God exists. After all, none of us live with 100% certainty of anything.

There is literally no way to be 100% certain that we aren't all characters in a video game right now.

That said- there are ways that we thoughtfully and rationally come to conclusions that we live as if something is true that we don't have certainty about.

For example, I can't be certain that every set of stairs isn't a trap- that its not just some optical illusion and when I step on the first stair- it will actually send me hurtling to my death in a deep dark pit. But, through repeatable experiences...and some understanding of what steps are made of...and how they work...and places they normally appear- I have come to live as if...every set of stairs I put my faith in is real and will get me to a higher or lower level of a structure.

So- there are some reasonable evidences that God, the creator, exists...some fingerprints that would point us to him...and to live as if God is real.

v19-20

Paul said that what can be known about God is evident- because God has shown it to us. He says that God's invisible attributes- namely his POWER and his DIVINE NATURE- ...can be seen through what he has made.

To the point that not a person in the world can say- “But I didn’t have any idea that there is a god!”

So I’m gonna give you a few of those fingerprints- those evidences of the reality of God now.

Here are a few of them.

First- lets start with kids. (From Finding Truth- Pearcey pg 31)

Sometimes we think that kids know a lot less than us and its their immaturity that doesn’t allow them to see what we grown ups can see very clearly.

But we also know, that kids say the darnedest things...and they often operate unafraid to just say things out loud that are just as they are.

For example, during the time we were teaching the biological difference between male and female to one of my boys around 2 or 3 years old- he would open the door to guests... and he would look at a person- determine their gender and proceed to tell them what body parts they had underneath their clothes.

Like I said, kids sometimes have a way of just cutting right down to the truth.

Jesus brought this out when he said, “Unless you become like one of these little ones, you’ll never enter the Kingdom of Heaven”

I think part of that sentiment was- you have to be honest with yourself about what is plainly in front of your face...that God is real.

Psychologist Paul Bloom at Yale University reports that

“When children are directly asked about the origin of animals and people, they tend to prefer explanations that involve an intentional creator, even if the adults who raised them do not.”

Put another way, even children of atheists who are being taught otherwise, favor a creator god over Darwinism.

Psychologist Justin Barrett at Oxford University reports similar findings. Through scientific study- evidence shows that-

“[B]uilt into the natural development of children’s minds is a predisposition to see the natural world as designed and purposeful and that some kind of intelligent being is behind that purpose.”

By the way- these are not people writing with a theistic or Christian bias. They are reporting the results of their scientific findings.

Now- lets talk about 4 other fingerprints of God that are more classical ideas that philosophers and scientists have wrestled with for a long, long time.

They are known as “arguments” for God. Not in a hostile way, but in a logical theory kind of way.

The Cosmological Argument: “How is there something rather than nothing?”

If the world started with a Big Bang- where did the materials that banged into each other come from?

If you keep going backwards eventually- you will hit nothingness. And mathematics tells us that multiplying anything by 0 is just zero. If you add zero to anything- you have no change. And you can’t even divide by 0- its literally called “undefined”.

Nothing times nobody cannot equal everything.

Darwinists have an explanation for the origin of life...but what about the origin of EVERYTHING ELSE in the COSMOS!?

The Teleological Argument: “If the world seems designed for a purpose...maybe it is!”

Teleos means “purpose” or an end in mind.

So the teleological argument says maybe we should consider that there is only one way an earth that is so finely tuned for human life- is actually finely tuned by a tuner that wants humans to exist.

(from JD Greear’s sermon <https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=9daa302e-44c5-4d76-ab7b-6d39fee73d03>)

This is called the “Goldilocks Principle”: the earth is “just right” for human life. Not too big or too small, too hot or too cold, too hard or too soft. JUST RIGHT.

If the nitrogen or oxygen or carbon dioxide was fraction of a hair higher or lower...we’d all burn up...or all freeze to death.

The water molecule is the only molecule who’s solid form (ice) is less dense than its liquid form. That means that when it freezes...it floats. If ice didn’t float in water- it would sink to the bottom of the ocean and the ocean would freeze over from the bottom up. and we’d all die. So every time you enjoy ice water you can say “Hallelujah! GOD IS REAL!”

If the earth were 2% closer to the sun, water could not exist on earth..and...I hate to belabor this point...but once again...we’d all die.

If the earth was not tilted on its axis at 23.5 degrees... we’d all die.

If Jupiter wasn't the size it is in the orbit its on- 10,000 times the number of asteroids would hit earth... no amounts of Bruce Willis' or Elijah Woods could save us. (look it up).

Put up your telescope now, and pull out your microscope.

Francis Collins, a former atheist who came to faith in his 20s, is head of the human genome project.

"How could a cosmic accident ever result in something of the digital elegance of a DNA strand?"- Dr. Francis Collins

Imagine an explosion going off in an ink factory and producing the collective works of William Shakespeare. We'd all say- NO WAY! There is an author to this!

Its like playing poker and the guy you are playing keeps coming up with all Aces. You know that its theoretically possible to have that happen, but your common sense is going to lead you to conclude that there is a designer behind these designer hands he keeps supposedly being "randomly" dealt.

Back to 1)

And yes- I know that my atheist or secular humanist friends would say "Maybe we're just lucky. In a universe as big as ours, eventually a planet was bound to exist somewhere like earth..and we just happened to win the lottery!"

But that would be the equivalent of tossing a coin every second and having it come up heads every time for 10 billion years in a row.

Possible? theoretically. but is the best explanation...the most common sense? To come to that conclusion you have go in biased against the existence of a designer. A God that has the power and will to do it.

v 21

Paul wrote that we "knew God". This is a term of intimacy. It means we heard from and understood God. So there is evidence outside of us for Gods existence...and there is evidence in our hearts for God's existence.

So let me show you 2 more arguments from Your heart, your will...rather than your physical make up.

The Desire Argument: "Why do we long for meaning, beauty, love, & justice?"

Atheist philosopher Albert Camus said that we all long for "love without parting" but that a universe without God gives us only "the conscious certainty of death without hope."

He called this “the Absurdity of life” and said that life was one long, tragic, absurd comedy as we seek things from life that it can never provide.

His solution?- “Bravely acknowledge that and plod forward into the darkness anyway!”

I’m listening to a podcast right now- Season 3 of “The Dream”. The first season was an exposure of Multi-Level Marketing scams. The second season was the exposure of the health and wellness industry...and Season 3 seeks to expose the “Life Coach” phenomena.

Behind all of those- and the people who fall prey to the scams- is a desire to live a life that is meaningful, beautiful, full of love...and that never ends. We all have this deep desire to love...and be loved...and yet...we can’t seem to find it then we die.

And we all know, love isn’t love if it has an expiration date.

“A baby feels hunger: Well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Humans feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”- C.S. Lewis

Which do you prefer? that our longings for eternal love and beauty are just an accident as we all tumble toward a dark abyss of nothingness...or that they are fingerprints of a God that created us for a world that he will remake- where our desires for unending love will absolutely and completely be met in him?

I gotta tell you, no matter what you believe- you have to live as if the second one is true...or nothing you do or feel makes any sense.

Finally..

The Moral Argument- “If there are universal moral laws, perhaps there is a universal law-giver.”

For as long as humans have lived- we have all lived with an internal sense of guilt and moral obligation that transcends cultures. Sure- there are some moral codes that are relative to the time and place and people that live by them...but they are all grounded in something universal.

No matter what culture you are in- there is a moral sense that murder is wrong. Now there are ways that its justified...but in general- every culture has a value of life and the ways its to be respected.

Only humans are like this. A Lion doesn't lose sleep at night thinking about the gazelle it hunted down earlier in the day.

And if you ever think your dog is kind of like a human kid- just look at the expectations you have if your kid breaks a little bunnies neck and starts to eat it. When your dog does it, you say "Oh Silly Rover- leave those bunnies alone."

If your kid does it, you start looking for a 666 birthmark in his hair and questioning whether the name "Damien" was as morally neutral as you thought it was.

Back to 1)

The bible says that we are created in God's image...which means with our morality and the basic things we long for...we know something intimate about God's character and the things he desires.

So cosmologically, teleologically, from our desires and our morality- we can say- we have pretty strong evidence that God not only exists...but made us with and for a purpose...that involves love, justice, beauty, and enjoying his creation.

...but we are not made to WORSHIP his creation...but to worship him.

And that brings to another one of Paul's points in this passage...

1) We suppress the truth because we want the gifts without the giver. But the Giver wants you & me.

Imagine a single mother.

She has one son. And she works her whole adult life to give her son a life where he feels safe, loved and provided for...even though his father walked out on him.

The young man grows up. And because of the love, sacrifice, and provision of his mother, he becomes a fine man. He is an influential and kind person in society. He starts multiple non-profits that help thousands of people. He is dedicated to his family and his work, and everyone knows him as the kind of person they want their kids to grow up to be like.

But there is one problem. The boy never speaks of his mother. Not in private or public. Anytime the subject comes up about his upbringing- he changes the subject or just outright says, "We are not talking about that."

He does, however, once a year, send a thank you note to his mother...thanking her for providing for him as a child.

And every so often- that mother picks up her phone and calls her son- hoping to just talk to him. She sits on her porch every birthday and holiday, hoping...maybe this year he'll come home and just sit on the porch with me and have a talk.

But he never does.

And she loves him...she is proud of the man he's become... but her heart is broken.

Does that story make sense to you? I know to you parents in the room it does. Our love for our kids goes far beyond wanting them to be moral and successful and represent our name well in the world. At the end of the day, we want a loving, attached relationship with our kids...or we end up with broken hearts.

This is the way it is with God.

v 18

Paul says that God's wrath is revealed against all godlessness and unrighteousness.

Godlessness means a brokenness or corruption in our relationship with God.

Unrighteousness is brokenness or corruption in our relationships with other people...or with God's creation.

He's talking about "sin". The word "sin" itself is a good indicator of what causes it. Sin happens when I put I in the middle of everything.

Meaning, when I make the universe about myself...instead of acknowledging God. That's godlessness.

Or when I make all of my relationships with others all about me. So I lie to protect me, even if others have to pay the cost for my lie. Or I live a proud life- never listening to others because I'm always the one making a big deal of myself. I overlook the needs and care of others because it will take time away from me doing what I want to do.

This is unrighteousness. that puts "I" in the middle. SIN.

And notice- Paul says that it is this desire to keep I in the middle...the way I treat others in order to make myself like a god- it is by that desire that I suppress the truth.

You ever go swimming and have a beach ball in there. And do you ever do the thing where you try to hold the beach ball underwater and keep it down as long as you can?

Yeah...and what happens when you let go? Every time that beach ball Pops out of the water with a force equal to its suppression.

Here's what Paul is saying.

We are so dead-set on elevating ourselves over God...that even the evidence of his existence in creation- that would demand that we recognize this is HIS world...that we play by HIS rules... we push it down like a beach ball...so that we can keep ourselves in the center.

Put another way. We don't come by our conclusion that God isn't there rationally...we come by it because we don't want the obligation of spending time with our single Mom.

We'll gladly take all his gifts...of life...of love...of justice...the cool fall breeze...a delicious hamburger...the mind to think all this stuff and the 5 senses to enjoy it all. And, we'll even write him a thank you note every now and then...show up to church...do something moral...

...but the truth is we don't want the accountability of showing up on our Father's porch to sit down and have a relationship with him.

Back to 2)

See- you don't have to be an outright atheist to practice atheism.

All you have to do is keep receiving the gifts of your heavenly Father...while you deny his presence and desire for a relationship with you.

Some of us think a relationship with God, knowing and acknowledging his role as our loving creator by spending time with him...by giving him control of your life....we think its a waste of time because we have this broken thing in us..this voice that despite all the evidence to the contrary says, "You know yourself better than God ever could. You should tell him what you're going to do."

And that- no matter how many times you show up and sing at church- its ungrateful. Its wasteful. And it doesn't matter how good a person you are or how many people you have shared the gospel with or how successful you are in your field or how many people say how great you are...you have broken your Father's heart.

A rocking chair sits empty on his front porch. And no amount of newspaper clippings or google searches that turn up what a great citizen you are- will be enough to acknowledge your heavenly father. He doesn't want your accomplishments.

He wants you.

Transition: But just like that beach ball- you can't suppress the truth for long...it always fiercely pops back up. See...

2) What you worship will control you.

Whatever you put in the center of your life...the main goal...the main purpose...that becomes what you worship. You give your life to pleasing it. Achieving it. Becoming it.

And the strange thing is- that we worship what we think will bring us freedom...yet those are the things that end up controlling us. We end up serving them.

This is idolatry...Paul talks about right here in this passage.

v 21-23

Those who suppress the truth...and refuse to acknowledge a relationship with God, they end up with worthless...or corrupt thinking. They operate like people who turned the lights out... bumping around and running into the furniture of the truth...with all kinds of injured shins... but saying, "No, No...I'm fine. That thing I hit in the dark wasn't real." Claiming to be wise- they became fools...and they exchanged GOD for the things God created.

That is idolatry. When you make that exchange.

Instead of worshipping God- you don't want to be accountable to him and risk losing control of your life- so you worship love instead.

Which God is love...the source of love...and the only way to experience eternal love... but you settle for something that God created "good"...like sex...or marriage...and you twist it to be your ultimate.

Well, when the sex doesn't satisfy you...or your spouse fails your expectation to be this wonderful person that saves you from your loneliness... you despair. You weep. You get angry. You lash out.

And in that moment its revealed to you.... "I'm completely controlled by this other person." Or "I'm completely controlled by lust."

I've never really been making free decisions. I've never really been in charge. I've just been giving myself to this desire to not be lonely...or to experience attachment and pleasure.

And I completely lose control as soon as the truth pops up to the surface that no amount or kind of sex....and no spouse could ever live up to the expectation I've put on them to be god to me.

See- what you ran from in God...you ended up giving yourself to lesser things that did exactly what you feared. Controlled you.

Here's the difference with God.

He made you to be completed by him.

He made you to find your joy in him.

He made you to have a relationship with him.

All of those other good gifts, like sex and marriage, are pointers to the relationship that can only be found in him.

And what I've just described answers the question that I think you all have had since we first read this passage.

v 18 & 24-25

Whats the deal with God's wrath? Why is he so angry?

Well- first- there are 2 kinds of wrath. Active and Passive.

Active would be what God did at Sodom and Gomorrah...or with the flood in Genesis 6.

Its what happened to Annaias and Sapphira in Acts 5- they lied...and God struck them down dead.

But- passive wrath is what is happening here. Its you telling God- "I don't want to come over to your stupid house" and he says, "Ok...go do what you want."

And then the natural consequences happen.

I would argue that God's active wrath is only the completion of his passive wrath. In other words- we undo our selves before God ever undoes us.

In fact, in the Greek- if you keep going all the way through v 28- you get a kind of tit for tat structure. The way it reads is "they exchanged the glory of God for images (v 23)... so God exchanged them over to disgraceful passions (v 26)

They dishonored God (v 21)...so God let them dishonor themselves (v 24)

They did not see fit (v 28) to acknowledge God...so God gave them up to an unfit mind (v 28)

Back to 3)

The truth is...nobody is separated from God, Nobody goes to hell.,Nobody rejects a relationship with God because they simply didn't know he exists.

We suppress the truth...and the truth...snaps back in our face.

And that....that...is why every single person needs to be saved from ourselves.

Because without God doing something about the natural consequence of our suppression of the truth...we will all hurtle towards the darkness.

And that is where Jesus comes in. (Well- the truth is- Jesus has been there all along. He was present at the creation of the universe.)

But he descended. He left the Fathers front porch...and came into our mess. Our darkness.

Jesus said "I am the Truth". The truth is not just a concept. He's a person...that wants a relationship.

I am the Life. The good life is not just a philosophical concept. Its a relationship with the God that created you.

Jesus said "I am the way. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Meaning that Jesus is your way home...and he is your home. He said, in fact- Make your home in me. Jesus is the front porch where God meets us.

And Jesus made the reverse exchange.

The concept of substitution may be said to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone.- John Stott

This is a description of Jesus on the cross.

In Jesus, God himself put on flesh, became a human and he suffered his own wrath against sin.

If you are concerned about wrath- you need to ask- if cancer was ravaging your child... would you have wrath against cancer?

Sin is ravaging God's children. But in Jesus, the doctor doesn't just operate on his children...he substitutes for them. He himself becomes our cancer...and on the cross is destroyed by his own dose of Chemo...so that we could live again.

And in that single act- you have the greatest love that has ever and will ever be. The deepest longing of every human heart. The God who created everything, not only became a part of his own creation- with his own DNA and fingerprints- he went down to the brokenness of his creation...on a cross.

The hands that cradled the stars...are the hands that bled for you.

Instead of delivering us over to our desires...in Jesus he shows that his desire is for us...and so he delivers us to himself.

Forgiven. Healed. Sin no longer owns us. And in Jesus, not even Death can stop us.

Back to 3)

We can observe the Power of God in Creation.

We can observe the Justice of God from our Conscience.

But we can only really see the depth of the Love of God from the Cross.

You are going to be controlled by what you worship. The beauty is...when you are controlled by the love of Christ- you finally can live the beautiful life you've been searching for in everything else.

This is the way Paul puts it in his letter to the church in Corinth.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion, that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised.

If it was refusing to worship God that first led you into sin, then beginning to worship him again will lead you out.

If you will give glory to him, and thank him, and submit to him, come home and sit on the porch with him... the corrupting power of sin will lose its hold over you.

Have you ever trusted Jesus- trusted his love for you? I'm inviting you to make that life altering decision right now.