"The Light of Nature and the Word of God'
(Romans 2:12-16)

Introduction: The Bible tells us over and over again that there is coming a day in which all the things we have done, all of our thoughts, all of our words and actions; our use of time, our talents and our resources; even the use of our affections; everything, will be brought under the scrutinizing gaze of the King of kings. This will take place on the day that Christ returns, on the day that He gathers all of His sheep to Himself and raises all of the dead, in order to bring them to the judgment bar of God. On that day, the Scripture reveals, there will also be mitigating circumstances which will be taken into account. Everyone will be judged according to all of the advantages or disadvantages that they have had. There will be those who have been the recipients of more light or more knowledge, and will therefore be more culpable, and there will be those who have been the recipients of less light, who will still be culpable for what they have done, but will not be judged as severely. But the Bible is plain in its indictment that all who have sinned against the Lord, and have not fled for relief in Christ, will be held guilty, because all will have sinned against some measure of light. And this brings us to the interesting question, as to what are these sources of light, and which source makes us more culpable in the eyes of the Lord? This is what we will examine this evening.

Paul has been arguing, in chapter one and two of the book of Romans, that all men are inexcusable before God for their sin. Paul says that he is not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the only message of salvation under heaven whereby, a man might be saved. But why do men need salvation? It is because all men have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (3:23). All men have known and rejected God. The Gentiles have rejected the light which they have received in nature. Paul will go on to argue that they have rejected the witness He has placed in their consciences, as well. The Jews, on the other hand, are no better off, for they have rejected the special revelation of God given to them on Mount Sinai, as well as the totality of His written revelation given to that point. Therefore, Paul argues, they cannot point a condemning finger at the Gentiles, when they themselves also do the same things and against greater light! The point is that,

God is not a God of partiality. He will judge all men according to their deeds, according to the light they have received.

This passage is important for us this evening, for it answers some basic questions about the guilt of all mankind, even those who are in the farthest reaches of the world, those who have never heard the Gospel. And it reveals to us the ongoing need for the work of missions.

I. Paul tells us that there are two basic groups of people in the world: those who have the Law and those who do not. We could put it in modern terms as those who have the Word of God and those who don't. And yet, even though all men do not possess the Scriptures, they are condemned to death.

A. First he says, "For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law.

1. In other words, men may not excuse themselves for their sins by claiming that they did not know God's will.

a. It is still possible to sin, even though you do not have the commands in front of you.
b. But doesn't this contradict what the Scripture says elsewhere? Doesn't Paul tell us in Romans 5:13, "For until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law"?
c. Our passage tells us that those who sin without the Law will also perish without the Law. Now, how can both be true?
d. Well, the answer comes in the following verse, 5:14, "Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come."
e. The point is that there was sin in the world prior to the giving of the Law of Moses on Mount Sinai, and its effect could be seen through the presence of death. But since there is no imputation of sin without law, and it is this imputation which brings about death, there must have been a law present. They were dying.
f. Where this law came from to which God held them responsible, we have yet to see. But it is clear that the Gentiles did not sin in the likeness of Adam's offense, because they did not have a law revealed to them as he did. Adam sinned against the clear command, "In the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die." But from Adam till Moses, there was no such clear command. Neither did God give such a command to the Gentiles.

2. "All who have sinned without the Law will also perish [or be lost] without the Law." That which renders a man guilty before God is the sin which he commits.

B. And second, Paul says, "All who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law."
1. Those who sin against a clear command have no excuse.
a. It is the Law which will judge them in the last day.
b. Jesus said, "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:45-47).

2. Paul continues, "For not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified."
a. How easy it is to deceive yourself into thinking that because you have the truth and believe it, and you have done all that is necessary.
b. The Pharisees thought that they were righteous because they heard God's Word. They even believed that it came from Him. But secretly they hated both God and His Law. This didn't become clear until Jesus came.
c. Jesus said, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well" (John 15:22-24). It is not that they would not have any sin, but that they would not have been culpable for this sin, of hating Christ. Christ came and did the works which showed that He was God's Son. If He hadn't, they might have been excusable. But since He had,

they were not. The rejection of Christ is the greatest of sins and makes all other sins insignificant.

d. Thinking that they were doing God service, they hated and killed His Son and even persecuted those who were His followers.

e. Therefore, we must beware that we do not content ourselves with a bare hearing of the Word.

f. It is not those who hear who are justified, but those who do what is required and do it perfectly. Now obviously no one is just in the sight of God on account of his works. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. On this basis, we all fall miserably short.

g. But from the aspect of Christ's work, we are viewed as having fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law in its totality. He has not only removed all of the guilt of His people through His offering of Himself on the cross, but He also positively kept the Law to earn a positive righteousness. It is the doers of the Law that will be justified.

h. Therefore, believing on the Lord Jesus Christ and turning from our sins is the only way we can ever meet that requirement.

i. But this tells us more. James writes that, even though we have been justified through faith in Christ, we must still remind ourselves that it is our duty to obey God. He writes, "But prove yourselves doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (1:22). We may, as the Pharisees, deceive ourselves into thinking that we are Christ's children merely because we listen to His Word. But remember, it is the one who does what He commands who is blessed, not the one who merely hears it. For when we hear and do it, then we show Christ that we love Him and His commandments.

II. But now let us get back to the question of how God holds the Gentiles accountable even though they do not have His written revelation. On what basis does He judge them worthy of death? Paul continues, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them."

A. Paul affirms that they do not have the Law, but yet he tells us that they might do the things of the Law instinctively.

1. That is, they might do these things "by nature," as a part of the way that they are made.
2. In which case, they are a law to themselves.
   a. This is not meant in a wicked sense as though every man may do what is right in his own eyes, and then have God judge him for what he believed to be right and wrong.
   b. No. Paul says that the things which they do are the same things which the Law requires. They do instinctively "the things of the Law."
   c. But where does this innate knowledge come from?

B. Paul says that this is the evidence that the work of the Law is written in their hearts.

1. This is one aspect of that law we saw earlier which must be in the world before sin can be imputed.
   a. It is the violation of this law that is reckoned to them, which results in their death,

for Paul says that they will be judged on this basis at the judgment seat of God.

b. The other aspect of their condemnation, of course, is that they already stand guilty of Adam's sin, and this sin is enough to eternally undo them by itself.

c. But it is compounded by the violation of this innate law which is said to be in all men.

2. Where does this law come from?

a. It is not something which men learn, for we have already seen that they did not have God's Law.

b. And yet this law contains basically the same principles as that written Law.

c. I would submit to you that all men have this law, this indwelling principle, by virtue of their being made in the image of God. This revelation of God's Law was a part of man's makeup as he was originally made in God's image. Adam had a knowledge of what God's righteous requirements were, even though his probation had only to do with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

d. After the Fall, this revelation of God's Law was greatly clouded and weakened by man's corruption, but yet it is still strong enough to see being worked out in all nations and at all times. Everywhere there is a universal sense of morality, of what is right and wrong.

e. This is not to say that there are not cultures which are more depraved than others. But in every nation, tribe, tongue and kindred you will find that the moral practice of the people fall into moral categories of the Law of God.

f. And this is only one part of God's general revelation to all men. Paul has already argued in Romans 1:18-20, that men "suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

g. This passage tells us that apart from the revelation of God in His Word, man has a great deal of knowledge about Him. All a person needs to do to see it is to ask himself why. Why are things as they are and not in some other way? What is the reason everything is as it is? What, in other words, caused everything to be?

h. The explanation of what we see cannot be found in the things which appear. Therefore, we know that God is behind it all. We know that God is infinite, because it is impossible that there could be any boundaries to what we see. There cannot be a place where you run into nothing. We know that God is eternal, for there cannot be a time when something began to be. If something is here now, there must always have been something.

i. We also know many things about God by looking at what He has made. Certainly the One who created all things must have at least those qualities which we possess. We see that He is intelligent, for we are intelligent. We know that He is personal, for we are persons.

j. We also know from the world around us that He is kind, for He has endowed the earth with good things for us to enjoy. And we know that something has caused Him to be angry, for throughout the creation are the signs of His displeasure.

j. But we can also know, relevant to what we see in this passage, that He is moral, for

He has made us moral creatures, who are capable of making moral choices. And this is all the more evident when we see within us a law placed there by the Creator to prick our consciences when we do what is wrong.

k. Paul says, "Their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them." Each of us can testify that this is true.

C. God has given to each man a great deal of knowledge concerning Himself and His will. And this is what will forms the basis upon which those apart from the revelation of the Law of God will be judged.

1. Paul now picks up the thought which he began to develop in verse 12. He writes, "For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law. . . on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus."
2. So you see, there is no one who has a legitimate excuse. Every man's mouth shall be closed and all the world will be held accountable to God.
   a. Even the native in the deepest darkest jungle on earth has the light of God's revelation in nature and in himself. He knows that God is, and he knows something of what he requires.
   b. But he is also without excuse for he cannot live up even to that light which he does possess.
   c. Unregenerate man finds that his conscience will accuse him far more than defend him, at least it will until he sins against that light of conscience enough to silence it forever.
   d. But there is a major flaw in this revelation, at least with respect to salvation. There is no flaw in the respect that this unveiling of the knowledge of God was never meant to save us. It was only meant to restrain some of our sin and to show us that we could never live up to God's righteous standards. It was given that we might, as Paul preached on the Areopagus, grope after Him that we might find Him, "though He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).
   e. It is really God's special revelation that we need if we are ever to find eternal life in Christ.
   f. Therefore, the Lord was pleased to give it and to commit it to writing that His truth may be preserved and that He might establish His church in it and fortify it against the world, the flesh and the devil.
   g. People of God, let us be thankful this evening that the Lord has given us such a precious Word. And let us devote ourselves to the study of it, that we might know His will. But let us not forget the other important lesson we have learned. "It is not the hearers of the Law" who "are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." Amen.