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Romans

...because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Romans 1:21

In this one verse is a sequence of events which shows us the depraved state of man as he spirals downward and away from God.

1) Man knows God; it is undeniable and self-evident. Paul treats the words “although they knew God” as an axiom. There is no valid argument against His existence and yet the arguments come. The Bible says when they do it is the fool who presents them –

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, They have done abominable works, There is none who does good. Psalm 14:1

2) Man fails to give God the glory that He is due. With his innate knowledge of God, man should turn and give Him glory. “I exist and it was because of the goodness of God that I am here...glory be to the One who created me and gave me life!” Instead though, we trudge through life in the pursuit of vanity, never stopping to simply thank Him or praise Him for life, beauty, food, joy, love, and blessing. Darkness covers the light that we should perceive –

The wise man's eyes are in his head, But the fool walks in darkness. Ecclesiastes 2:14

This leads us to the next depraved step –

3) The natural result of failing to glorify God is a state of ingratitude. Paul says, "...nor were they thankful." If you put someone on welfare because of a lost job, they will first think "I'm so thankful. I'll be able to eat this week." Very quickly though what was given as a temporary fix becomes expected and even demanded. If you don't believe this, go do mission work for a short time. People, out of the goodness of their hearts, set up kitchens to feed the inner city poor. However, the recipient's appreciation quickly fades and eventually the thought that they are entitled to a free meal sets in. Strict rules must be set in place or fighting and outbursts of immense selfishness arise. If we treat those we can see in this manner, how much more the God we can't see and who we never gave a second thought to anyway. This ingratitude leads to the next step downward...

4) The result of ingratitude is futility in thinking. The word here is dialogismos, a word which indicates the inward contemplations and reasoning of man. In other words, this is a state of rationalism about who we are, why we are here, the nature or even the existence of God, etc. The ungrateful naturally rationalize away their ingratitude. They are self-absorbed and so they are inwardly motivated to create a god in their own mind. They know what they have is undeserved, but they also know that by acknowledging the true God, they are actually accountable to Him. And so they turn to any god that will suit their state at the moment. They begin to worship the creation rather than the Creator.

5) Because of this logical progression away from God, "their foolish hearts were darkened." This is a state of complete spiritual blindness. However, man in his most depraved state will often appear to be the most enlightened. The "intellectual elite" and the greats of world religions are often the most depraved. Peter speaks of people who have reached this state of spiritual darkness. They deny what is spiritually correct while espousing utter falsities about God, the natural order, and right reason. He labels these types "brute beasts." They are

unreasoning animals who have lost all right sense and follow only the basest instincts –

“But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand, and will utterly perish in their own corruption, and will receive the wages of unrighteousness, as those who count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime. They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. 2 Peter 2:12-14

The people Paul speaks of and who are described by Peter fill the halls of religions around the world, including Christianity. Denominations are ordaining homosexuals, mixing false religion with the truth, and are pursuing money and fame rather than righteousness. In the verses ahead, Paul will continue to explain these things, all of which are to remind us that God is just in His wrath and indignation.

Life application: We are either moving toward God in holiness or away from Him into a state of depravity and spiritual darkness. There is no static state in our relationship with God and therefore we need to continually strive to glorify Him and be thankful to Him.

Professing to be wise, they became fools... Romans 1:22

Paul is continuing to build on the thought of the previous verse. Those who innately know there is a God but who failed to glorify Him and give Him thanks then “became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” In this spiritually darkened state, they profess themselves to “be wise.”

The word “wise” is translated from *sophoi* (from the same word as *Sophia*). It is wisdom that would be ascribed to the intellectually and culturally sophisticated

people of the Greek civilization. These would then be the religious and intellectual cream of the crop. However, without directing their attention to the truth about God, which is as simple and easy to understand as looking up and knowing that the universe didn't create itself, they then "became fools."

The single word for "they became fools" here is *emoranthesan* and yes, the "fool" portion is the source of our modern word "moron." It is almost comedic to think about these people, then and now, strut around professing either religious or intellectual superiority and yet God's word calls them morons. But the stupidity of their arguments proves the title.

In Acts chapter 17, Paul speaks to these elite when he addresses the Aeropagus. It was an open air forum where "all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing." (Acts 17:21) Paul walked into the center of this vast stadium and told them of the "New Thing" in his life which was from before the creation of the world. In his short discourse, he actually quoted two of their own philosophers – Erastus and Epimenides, using their own contemplations to demonstrate what he has thus far been saying in Romans – that we innately know certain things about God.

In both the Old Testament and the New (as is highlighted in Acts 17), man sets up idols which are a part of creation – wood, stone, gold, or whatever – bowing to them and giving them credit for the good stuff that happens in life. Paul says that these people have become foolish because of such things.

But there is also the foolishness of denying God exists. A modern "deep thinker" and atheist is Richard Dawkins. During one filmed interview he actually said that maybe aliens had seeded life on planet earth. This supposed wise thinker of the atheist community simply pushed the origins of life back one step, but he could give no ultimate answer for where the aliens then came from. In his futile attempt to deny the obvious, he made himself look like the moron he had become. His lack of religion is his religion and he is spreading the inane message to a world hungry for anything except the truth.

Life application: Here we are. Will we give the credit for our existence to the Creator or to a part of the creation? Will we acknowledge that we are wise by acknowledging His wisdom, or will we prove ourselves morons when we shut our hearts and minds to the truth? Be wise and stand on the obvious – “in Him we live and move and have our being.” (Act 17:28 as cited by Paul when quoting Epimenide’s Creatia).

**...and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.
Romans 1:23**

As Paul noted in the previous verse, which is a part of this sentence, “Professing to be wise they became fools...” The reason this happened is based on the logical sequence of events which preceded it. As man rejects God, the knowledge of Him must be replaced with something; all vacuums look to be filled. These people, wise in their own eyes, become fools and trade what is glorious for what is ignoble, what is of highest value for that which perishes, of what is holy for that which is profane.

Paul gives four categories of idolatry, each more base than the next. First man changes “the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man.” Man was created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26) and so in ignoring God, he moves to the next visible part of the creation in worship; he worships himself. And in order to glorify himself, he makes an image of himself. If you see what is happening, God created man in order to bring Himself glory. By creating a sentient being who can appreciate the rest of His creation and also fellowship with Him, man was intended to glorify God through thanks and praise (see verse 21).

However, the thanks and praise weren’t forthcoming which led to where man is now – exalting himself through self-deification and making an idol in his own image; He is attempting to emulate the God of creation. By taking this action

though he actually degrades his perception of the real God and thus the spiral continues down.

The next step is to make images of things that are even beneath him - "birds and four footed animals and creeping things." Amazingly, not only is man now directing his worship toward creatures that are beneath him, he worships images of creatures. He has taken what is even below the lowliest creeping thing – inanimate objects such as wood, stone, or metal – and fashioned it with his own hands into something... and then he prays to the thing he has made which resembles something beneath his own category of life. His mind is completely lost in idolatry.

Isaiah writes about this attitude and the sheer folly it displays –

Those who make an image, all of them are useless,
And their precious things shall not profit;
They are their own witnesses;
They neither see nor know, that they may be ashamed.
Who would form a god or mold an image
That profits him nothing?
Surely all his companions would be ashamed;
And the workmen, they are mere men.
Let them all be gathered together,
Let them stand up; Yet they shall fear,
They shall be ashamed together.
The blacksmith with the tongs works one in the coals,
Fashions it with hammers,
And works it with the strength of his arms.

Even so, he is hungry, and his strength fails;
He drinks no water and is faint.
The craftsman stretches out his rule,
He marks one out with chalk;
He fashions it with a plane,
He marks it out with the compass,
And makes it like the figure of a man,
According to the beauty of a man, that it may remain in the house.
He cuts down cedars for himself,
And takes the cypress and the oak;
He secures it for himself among the trees of the forest.
He plants a pine, and the rain nourishes it.
Then it shall be for a man to burn,
For he will take some of it and warm himself;
Yes, he kindles it and bakes bread;
Indeed he makes a god and worships it;
He makes it a carved image, and falls down to it.
He burns half of it in the fire;
With this half he eats meat;
He roasts a roast, and is satisfied.
He even warms himself and says,
“Ah! I am warm, I have seen the fire.”
And the rest of it he makes into a god,
His carved image.
He falls down before it and worships it,
Prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!”

They do not know nor understand;
For He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see,
And their hearts, so that they cannot understand.
And no one considers in his heart,
Nor is there knowledge nor understanding to say,
“I have burned half of it in the fire,
Yes, I have also baked bread on its coals;
I have roasted meat and eaten it;
And shall I make the rest of it an abomination?
Shall I fall down before a block of wood?”
He feeds on ashes;
A deceived heart has turned him aside;
And he cannot deliver his soul,
Nor say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?” Isaiah 44:9-20

Idolatry isn't an affliction of ages past. It is found in religions throughout the world today and it is found in every human heart at one time or another. Anything which replaces our devotion to God becomes an idol and therefore we must protect against falling into this trap. The Bible's wonderful advice in Hebrews 12:2 will help us to keep from straying – “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus...”

Life application: Do you read daily horoscopes? Do you “knock on wood” in hopes of favor? When you break a mirror do you even in a kidding manner say “Oh that's bad luck.”? Giving credit to any created thing for chance or destiny demonstrates a wrong attitude toward the Creator who has written our destiny. Stand firm on giving Him the praise, honor, and glory that He is due and let your actions and words reflect His value at all times.