

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 1:21-23

22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Student Notes:

Romans chapter one: A discernable outline: The Revelation, The Rejection, The Rationalization, and Religion (human-made).

All of this represents a continuing downward spiral.

Two phrases that tell the story: 1. "For although they knew God..." 2. "Although they claimed to be wise..."

- **1. "For although they knew God..." -- Futile Minds and Idol Worship:**

v. 21: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, **but their thinking became futile...**"

Even though people knew God in terms of his existence, power, and divine nature, they did not acknowledge him. Having suppressed the knowledge of God, they became futile in their thoughts."

The term "futile", is directly tied to idolatry in the Greek Old Testament. (See Jeremiah 2:5) To suppress the knowledge of God is to engage in the futility of idolatry. It represents giving oneself to "nothing," a non-entity, since an idol is in reality "nothing." (See also 1Corinthians 8 on food sacrificed to idols)

- **The Depth of Futile Thinking: v. 23**

Humans exchanged God himself for images of reptiles, four-footed animals, birds, and even human beings (v. 23).

What is the best the worship of an idol can produce? For some, it can temporarily reduce the demand on a guilty conscience, or give the false sense of placating an angry god.

But as the Old Testament repeatedly warns, idols cannot save. They cannot rescue their worshippers. That's the message Isaiah repeatedly gives Israel. See: Isaiah 41:22-23; Isaiah 44:9-10; Isaiah 44:18

Idolatry is the replacement of God, and true knowledge of him with inferior objects of worship. (See Judges 5:1-5 on Jehovah and Dagon)

- **“Although they claimed to be wise...” -- The Outcome Of The Exchange:**

Verses 22-23 “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”

The truly ironic stupidity: Humanity claimed for themselves the characteristic of wisdom as they replaced the worship of God, who is immortal, for the worship of his creation, which is mortal.

Instead of becoming wise, in reality they became fools. Greek word here is “emōranthēsan”: “To make foolish, to show oneself foolish. It implies to become a fool, be made a fool.” (See 1Corinthians 1:18-21)

Given their exchange of the living, immortal, all-powerful God for images that men have copied from nature – is it any wonder Paul refers to their hearts as “asunetos” – senseless as well as “eskotisthe” – darkened?

The combination of those words is meant to tell us that in a post-God world we have “empty, useless, human dialogue.” Just as humans reverted from the immortal God to mortal gods, they also reverted from truth to emptiness; “their foolish heart was darkened.”

As John MacArthur puts it, “[That] emptiness created a vacuum and it sucked in darkness.”

Paul’s use of “darkness”: 1. Intellectual darkness. 2. Moral darkness.

In the next few verses: Spiritual ignorance will spawn moral perversion – the reversal of God’s original intention and the degradation of sexual practices He explicitly forbade.

So what happens as a result of this illogical exchange of the living, immortal God or mortal images? Man forfeits spiritual and intellectual understanding. He forfeits morality. He embraces the vacuum and disseminates darkened philosophies.

What man embraces has no power to restrain evil. Their godless beliefs are intertwined with darkness immorality. That’s the legacy the godless world continues to proliferate generation after generation.

So what does God do when his creations reject him and replace him with completely inferior gods? That’s what we will see next time.