

Lesson 5: They Gave God Up (Rom 1:24-25)

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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THE REDEMPTION

DRAMA

(The Theological Block)
(1:18-11:36)

Paul's first line of argument in this theological section is that all men, Jews and Gentiles alike are condemned . . .

The Guilt of the Gentiles (1:18-32)

*They Gave God Up Even Though They Had Adequate Evidence
for His Existence (1:19-23)*

Paul's argument here is that the Gentiles had every good reason to believe in God (i.e., to know that God was God) and no good reason to disbelieve, and they were without excuse for their disbelief. All men, of all ages, in all cultures had before them evidence adequate to convince them that there must, of necessity, be a Creator, if there is a creation. The Gentile world, for the most part, denied him; and in his place **they worshipped that which was created.**

*They Replaced Him With the Worship of Idols Even
Though They Had No Evidence from Which
to Conclude That These Things Existed as Gods (1:21-23)*

Paul's reasoning is as follows:

*. . . because, although they knew God (i.e., knowing of the existence of God), they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful (i.e., they did not worship him as God), but **became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.** ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and **changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.***

The imagery here would have had great relevancy for the recipients of this letter living in Rome. In this ancient city were the representatives of most of the idolatry of the first century Mediterranean world.

An Image Made Like Corruptible Man

Idolatry is hard to explain. It seem, however, that man in intent on trying to access whatever powers conceivable, whether in reality or imagination, that will grant him his hearts desires. These desires fall into three areas: the lust for power, the lust for wealth, and the lust for pleasure. The people of these ancient cultures had a large collection of objects of devotion in their pantheon of deities, all of which may be grouped into these three areas.

They Worshipped Deities Associated with Power

Zeus was the most powerful of the Greek gods of the of the Olympian Pantheon. The Romans called him Jupiter. **Nike** was the goddess of conquest or victory. **Ares** was the Greek God of war (warriors) and victory. **Athena** was the warrior goddess of Greece; she was the daughter of Zeus who sprang from his head in full armor. **Mars** was the Roman god of war. Associated with him were other gods and goddesses such as Ajax (the soldier god), Amazon (the goddess of the female warriors of Asia Minor), Bellona (a Roman goddess of war), and Quirinus (another Roman war deity). **Mithras** was a warrior deity of Persia; he was a deity figure the Greeks pick up from Persia when Alexander captured Babylon. He was the most popular warrior deity of the Roman legions. He was supposed to be able to change himself into a bull. **Caesar** was the Latin title for the Roman emperor from the time of Julius Caesar. All those within the Roman Empire were to worship the emperor as a ruling deity who brought peace to the people through power.

They Worshipped Deities Associated with Wealth

Plutos is the Greek word for “wealth;” the personification of which was **Plutos** the god of wealth. He was the son of Demeter (the mother goddess). In Greek mythology, he was blinded by Zeus so he could not show favoritism to the mortals. His statues show him with a cornucopia filled with food. **Tuche** was the Greek goddess for “good fortune,” success, “lady luck!” **Fortuna** was the Roman god of wealth or good fortune. Under the major gods and goddesses of wealth were minor deities of good fortune such as “**the Fates**” (with various names) who determined one’s destiny. The Jews called the personification of wealth, worshipped by the pagans of Palestine, “**Mammon**,” the Hebrew and Aramaic word for “wealth, money, greed, avarice, riches.” “**Belial**” was another deity of this culture; he was the god of ill gotten gain, theft, or wealth gotten by the use of evil. Also associated with the worship of prosperity were the **fertility gods and goddesses** who blessed the lives of their worshipper with goods, property, livestock, crops, and offsprings. These were very popular deities throughout the Mediterranean world. **Demeter** was the Greek goddess of fertility, something a “mother nature” figure. **Hera** was the wife of Zeus and cause mortals to be fertile. **Artemis or Diana** was the primary fertility goddess of Asia Minor (Diana of the Ephesians). **Isis and Osiris** were the ruling deities of Egypt; both granted prosperity to their worshippers through fertility of the land. **Baal and Baalat** were Canaanite deities of wealth and fertility.

They Worshipped Deities Associated with Sensual Pleasure

The Greek **Aphrodite** (called **Venus** by the Romans) was one of the most popular of the pantheon. She was the goddess of sexual love, passion, or sensual pleasure. In Greek mythology she was said to be the most beautiful female of all goddesses or mortal women. In all her myths, Aphrodite is portrayed as having a wanton sexual appetite and is portrayed throughout Greek mythology as an adulteress and fornicator. She had affairs with practically every male god of Greek mythology, with exception of Zeus, her father. **Eros** (the Roman **Cupid**) was the offspring of Aphrodite. He was named after the Greek word for sensual attraction, the word from which “erotic” derives in English. **Adonis** is best known as the male lover of Aphrodite although he never married her. Aphrodite was forced by the gods to marry an older minor deity and this is why she felt justified in her adulterous sexual activity. Her husband was not enough for her, so she went on the prowl for gods and mortals alike to satisfy her sexual needs;

Adonis was one of her favorite lovers. Also associated with the deities of sensual pleasure were the **Nymphs**, minor forest deities who were very sensual and liked to play games of seduction with mortals. The male version of the Nymphs were the **Satyrs**, the two most famous were the Greek **Pan** and the Roman **Faun**. They were portrayed as human looking demigods with hoofs and pointed ears like a goat. Both the Nymphs and the Satyrs were believed to have insatiable sensual appetites, from which derives the term nymphomania. There were other minor deities such as the **Sirens** who lured sailors with their enchanting singing. The Greek **Dionysus** (the Romans called him **Bacchus**) was the god of wine and revelry. Intoxication was believed to be a spell cast by Dionysus or Bacchus; so also madness or insanity. The festival of Dionysus (or Bacchus) was the most popular celebration of the Greco-Roman world. **Hades** (from the Greek word “unseen”), one of the major Olympian deities, had a variety of myths associated with him. He was the god of the underworld and his most powerful lure was to entice deities and mortals to sell their soul for power, wealth, or pleasure. Through the worship of these other gods and goddesses of power, wealth, or pleasure Hades could gain control of mortals and claim their soul at death.

These gods and goddesses were nothing more or less than **personifications of the appetites or desires of the people who worshipped them**. Man created gods in the image of himself and it is the same today as it was then. The driving forces of every culture of man fall into one or more of these areas. **Friedrich Nietzsche** argued that the most powerful of all human drives is the lust for power. His philosophy greatly influenced Adolf Hitler, whose lust for power produced the worst war in human history. **Karl Marx** insisted that wealth was the primary driving force of all of man’s efforts at civilization. His philosophy resulted in the rise of the philosophical ideology of Communism, which resulted as a challenge to Imperialism and Capitalism; all ideologies built on the belief that wealth is the answer to all human unhappiness. **Sigmund Freud** attempted to convince the world that all human behavior was driven by the desire to fulfill the need for sexual pleasure. The Western world, especially America, appears to be giving every evidence that his observations were true. As it was at the time of this writing Paul, so is it today.

Paul also adds to this list of objects of idolatry:

Birds And Four-Footed Animals And Creeping Things.

As we have seen, many of the pagan religions centered their belief in myths associated with the gods and goddesses they worshipped. According to many of these myths, these gods and goddesses could transform themselves into the form of man and of animals. The Romans worshipped **birds** (eagles, owls, hawks) as well as man (kings or emperors were worshipped in Greece, Egypt, and Rome as gods). **Four-footed creatures** such as the bull were worshipped in the Persian-Roman religion of Mithraism. In the myth of Mithra, the god is transformed into a bull, whose blood, when killed, empowers his worshipers when they anoint themselves with it or are baptized into it. The Greek-Egyptian god Osiris could transform himself into a bull, and the Greek-Egyptian goddess, Isis, could transform herself into a dove. **Reptiles** (i.e., the Python, the Asp, and the Crocodile) were worshipped by many as the incarnation of gods and goddesses.

Paul's point is clear, **mankind had rejected God**, refused to believe in the Creator, and **in his place they set "the creature"** (that which was created) **as the object of belief and devotion**. This is what **idolatry** is: *displacing God as the object of our devotion or putting the creation at the center of our universe rather than the Creator*. Man was a self-degraded being. But his decline from a being created in the image of God to a being who created gods in his own image began in "disbelief." They gave God up.

Conclusion

In a recent survey, 80% of Americans questioned said they believed in a Supreme Being. They were not so sure, however, that such a being had communicated with man. It appears to be easy to believe that a Supreme Being created us, but not so easy to believe that he is interested in what he created. Why would God have created us to be who and what we are unless he had a good reason or purpose for doing so? The oldest answer as to why God created man is that man is made in the image of God and his existence here is to sojourn through this vale of soul-making (this space and time realm of existence) to fit himself for eternal fellowship with God. This answer, however, is not acceptable to those who have no mind for it. Here is the point Paul makes. Man *did not want* to have God in his knowledge. The wise (the intelligentsia) did not want God (the Supreme Being) to be a part of their "wisdom."

So, they created gods in their own image – gods reflecting their own wants and desires. If God revealed himself to man as a Holy God and a Good God, and he created man in his moral image, then man is to reflect the holiness and goodness of God in his existence. Isn't this exactly what God expected of Adam? But why was being holy and good not acceptable to Adam? All it took was someone saying to him, "Don't believe in what God said!"

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, "You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die." Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen 3:1-3)

But in Gen 2:16, God said to Adam, *"And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.' "*

When confronted with a choice, they ate of the forbidden tree. Why in the world did Adam and Eve do that? Because they wanted to be like God! "You will be like God!" So then! So in the day of Paul! So in our world today!

. . . 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. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man. (Rom 1:21-23)

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