

THE CORRUPTION OF WORSHIP ROMANS 1:21–23

INTRODUCTION

As we work through the larger section in which Paul has much to say about **the wrath of God**, it's helpful to remember the argument that he's making.

In verse 18, Paul gave us his **thesis**—this is the **theme of the section** and the **big idea** that he aimed to communicate.

Paul told us that **God has an intense hatred of all sin** and so He is **presently responding to human rebellion** with His wrath.

In order to clearly establish that **God is righteous in His wrath**, that His punishment of sin is just, Paul goes onto **explain why God responds in wrath**.

The section from **verses 19–23** explains **WHY** God responds to human rebellion with His wrath.

Paul will later explain **HOW** God responds with wrath, but for now we are studying **two reasons for the wrath of God**.

As we examined **verses 19–20** last Sunday, we studied the **first reason** for the wrath of God.

We learnt that man is accountable for rejecting God.

God has a message in creation that we call **natural revelation**.

God's message accomplishes two goals:

1. It clearly reveals God to man
2. It justly holds man responsible for rejecting God

Because of the natural revelation of God, **man has no excuse for his rejection of God** in sinful rebellion and **God is just in punishing** this rejection with His wrath.

In verses 19–20, Paul chooses his words very carefully in order to be clear that God's message in creation ensures that all men, **at all times and all places, possess some kind of knowledge of God** which is nevertheless incomplete.

Natural revelation is insufficient to bring one into a saving relationship with God, though it is **sufficient for the one purpose** that God has designed it for—to hold man accountable.

Now, after carefully studying Paul's explanation, we are able to **understand HOW God's message in creation works**.

To begin with, every man possesses a so-called **'innate idea of God.'**

As **John Calvin** wrote, "*There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.*"¹

This leaves man with what one author described as, **"a felt ignorance" or "awareness of ignorance."**

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 43.

This **“awareness of ignorance”** never rises to the level of **knowledge as understanding**.

As **the author** explains, *“Awareness is a passive and spontaneous mental activity based on observation. It is not a deliberate rational process.”*²

This **‘innate idea of God’** is then, as **Calvin** said, a **“natural instinct.”**

Man has been **made in the image of God**, and as such has the **reality of God engraved on his heart** so that he is always aware of God even if he does not know more of God.

As **another commentator** wrote, *“We know that God is He whom we do not know.”*³

The problem is that this **vague awareness**—the innate idea of God—does not cause man to seek an **effective knowledge of God through revelation**.⁴

² Richard Alan Young, “The Knowledge of God in Romans 1:18-23: Exegetical and Theological Reflections,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 4 (2000): 706.

³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, Sixth Edition (London; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 45.

⁴ Young, *JETS*, 705–706.

Since the innate idea of God leaves man with only “a felt ignorance” or “awareness of ignorance,” **God reveals Himself through His creation.**⁵

God’s message in creation ensures that **all people possess some kind of knowledge of God**, albeit an **incomplete knowledge** that is sufficient only to hold man accountable.

As Paul has clarified, natural revelation is **not the knowledge** that man may arrive at through **careful deduction and reasoning.**⁶

It is **not man’s thoughts about God**, but **God’s revelation of Himself in nature** as He actively ensures the clarity of the revelation.⁷

God’s message in creation **builds on the foundation** of man’s innate idea of God and **reveals certain of His “invisible attributes”** as Paul states in **verse 20.**

Through natural revelation, man has more than just **“felt ignorance,”** but as we may **paraphrase Paul**—

⁵ “Paul did not explain exactly how God reveals Himself in nature, and there have been three popular explanations.... None of these views is demonstrably certain, and all of them have problems. More than one may be true. But there is no question that God has revealed Himself in nature.” Thomas L. Constable, Dr. Constable’s Expository Notes on Romans, (Plano, TX: Sonic Light, 2025), <https://soniclight.com/constable-notes/>, 43.

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 93–94.

⁷ Cf. Bruce A. Baker, “Romans 1:18–21 and Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998): 292.

“Ever since the time of creation, humans have mentally perceived something about the invisible God by means of observing things that are made.”⁸

That is, **God has ensured** that His message in creation is **clear** and man, as a result, has **clearly comprehended** the message.

According to **verse 20**, what is revealed to man is God’s **“divine nature,”** or as some scholars translate the term, His **“divine majesty.”**⁹

So we can understand now **HOW God's natural revelation** to man works in **holding man accountable.**

Through creation, all mankind is **aware that God is the Creator** who should be worshiped.¹⁰

As such, we should also understand God’s message in creation to be an **invitation to worship Him,** to **acknowledge Him as God and to give Him what is due.**¹¹

That brings us to our text in **verses 21–23** today and the **second reason for the wrath of God.**

⁸ Young, *JETS*, 703.

⁹ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), θειότης.

¹⁰ Cf. Young, *JETS*, 704.

¹¹ Cf. Ronald E. Man, “False and True Worship in Romans 1:18–25,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (2000): 28.

The second reason WHY God responds to human rebellion with His wrath is that **man is accountable for REPLACING God.**

Not only does man **reject God**, but he also **replaces God in the corruption of his worship.**

By refusing to worship God as Creator, man **invariably worships the creation in idolatry.**

Within his larger theme of the wrath of God, Paul also offers an **explanation of the paganism of his day**, with all of its perversions.

As commentator **F. F. Bruce** writes, **Paul teaches us that—**
*“It all arises... from wrong ideas about God. And these wrong ideas about God did not arise innocently; the knowledge of the true God was accessible, but men and women closed their minds to it.”*¹²

Instead of worshipping God **in response to His revelation**, **man chooses to worship created things** instead.

This **idolatry is the source of the immorality** that we see in society.

In other words, as Paul deals with the theme of the wrath of God, he teaches us that **the corruption of our knowledge** leads to **the corruption of our worship**, and the corruption of our worship leads to **the corruption of our morality and conduct.**

¹² F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 89.

Therefore, the corruption of worship **explains both WHY** God responds in wrath **and WHY human society** is characterised by unrighteousness.

As **one author** put it, “*the unfolding of history involves a disclosure of the wrath of God against sin, seen in the terrible corruption and perversion of human life.*”¹³

So to introduce the subject of the corruption of worship, let's take a few minutes to consider **six corruptions** of the **true knowledge of God** when man rejects natural revelation.¹⁴

The first corruption is pantheism. Pantheism is an identification of creation or nature with God: all things are divine.

This is the view that God is everything and everything is God.¹⁵

There is no valid distinction between the Creator and creation.

We see this **corrupted knowledge of God** in our day through the **environmental movement, New Age spirituality,** and talk of **Mother Nature.**

¹³ Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976), 10:22.

¹⁴ The following adapted from Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 52–53.

¹⁵ Phil Johnson, “What’s New with the New Age? Why Christians Need to Remain on Guard against the Threat of New Age Spirituality,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 4 (2006): 76.

The second corruption is panentheism. Panentheism does not go as far as pantheism in identifying God with creation.

This is the view that God is in everything and everything is in God.

The difference here is that panentheists believe that God is Someone or something—an impersonal force—bigger than the universe.¹⁶

So the universe is God but that God is more than the universe.¹⁷

Effectively, God is remote and unknowable, and so practically irrelevant to us.

This **corrupted knowledge of God** sees man as autonomous and the master of his fate.

The third corruption is polytheism. Polytheism is the belief in a plurality of divine beings.

Historically this was demonstrated by the pantheon of ‘gods’ that the Greeks and Romans worshipped.

In our day it is seen in the ideas of **Mormonism** which teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three separate gods.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 76–77.

¹⁷ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 321.

¹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 329.

This corrupted knowledge of God is also seen in religions like **Hinduism** which believes in over 330 million personal manifestations of the one impersonal ultimate Reality.¹⁹

The fourth corruption is monotheism, that is, the unbiblical **monotheism of false religions**.

Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God, who is thereby clearly distinguished from the creation.

It is a **corrupted form of knowledge** in the teachings of **Islam** and **Orthodox Judaism**.

Islam believes in the false God of Allah, while Orthodox Judaism rejects the trinitarian view of God and refuses to embrace Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

The fifth corruption is deism. Deism believes that while God is Creator, He is remote from the world.

Deism is a **corrupted form of knowledge** that exchanges God's personal care for the world for a mechanistic model—

“God is like a watchmaker who created the world, including the natural laws it needs for continuous operation, wound it up, and let go, never to intervene.”²⁰

¹⁹ Norman L. Geisler, “Polytheism,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 602.

²⁰ Gregg R. Allison, “Deism,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 59.

The sixth corruption is nontheism. While **nontheism** is a broad category that includes pantheism, I'll use it to refer to the various beliefs that **reject the idea of God.**

This **corrupted form of knowledge** includes atheists and agnostics.

Atheism is the position that denies the reality of a personal God or other divine beings.²¹

In contrast to a theist, who believes God exists beyond the world, and a pantheist, who believes God is the world, an atheist believes there is no God.²²

There is only a universe and nothing more.

Agnosticism is the position that **neither affirms** belief in God (theism) **nor denies** the existence of God (atheism) but instead **suspends judgment.**²³

An agnostic is someone who claims not to know.

There are **two basic kinds** of agnostics, those who claim that the existence and nature of God are not known, and those who believe God is unknowable.²⁴

²¹ Cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 13.

²² Geisler, "Atheism," *Baker Encyclopedia*, 55.

²³ Evans, *Pocket Dictionary*, 8.

²⁴ Geisler, "Agnosticism," *Baker Encyclopedia*, 10.

All six of these corruptions of the knowledge of God **reject God's revelation in creation** and **REPLACE** the worship of the Creator God with the worship of creation, even if it is the worship of humanity or self, as in the case of atheism and agnosticism.

Thus, the **corruption of the knowledge of God** invariably leads to the **corruption of the worship of God**.

As man rejects God's message in creation, he replaces the worship of God with idolatry.

The corruption man's worship in idolatry then **explains why God responds in wrath**, and **why human society** is marred by perversity and all manner of depravity.

So not only does our text offers an explanation of the paganism of Paul's day, but it **also explains the paganism of our day**, along with all of the **perversions of our culture**.

With that introduction, we're now able to turn our attention to the details of our text.

PROPOSITION

As we study **Romans 1:21–23**, **Paul explains the corruption of man's worship in three steps**:

1. The rejection of God (**21**)
2. The corruption of man (**21–22**)
3. The replacement of God (**23**)

1. THE REJECTION OF GOD (21)

The first step in the corruption of man's worship is his **rejection of God**, as Paul explains in **verse 21**—

For even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks...

The use of the **connecting word “For”** tells us that Paul is **continuing in his argument** from **verses 19–20**.

Specifically, Paul is building upon what he has said about God's invisible attributes, both His eternal power and divine nature, being **clearly communicated by God** and clearly comprehended by man.

Confirming what we have already established from our previous study, Paul concedes that **“they knew God.”**

The language Paul uses is intended to **indict man for his rejection** of God's message in creation.

We have already established that all men, at all times and all places, possess some kind of knowledge of God which is nevertheless incomplete.

As **J. B. Phillips** accurately **paraphrases verse 21**,
“They knew all the time that there is a God.”

Paul uses the knowledge of God here in **verse 21** in the sense of **experiential knowledge**.²⁵

Though man is **constantly suppressing** the truth about God, according to **verse 18**, and **rejecting the revelation** of God in creation according to **verses 19–20**, Paul is arguing in **verse 21** that man could nonetheless **not escape knowing God** in some basic manner.

Even if man does not know God in the sense of a saving relationship, and even if man does not acknowledge what he plainly perceive about God in creation, **he cannot escape experience of God** as creatures within God's creation.

As **one commentator** explains—

“They have in fact experienced Him—His wisdom, power, generosity—in every moment of their existence, though they have not recognised Him.

*It has been by Him that their lives have been sustained, enriched, bounded. In this limited sense they have known Him all their lives.”*²⁶

So Paul is saying is that **even when man rejects natural revelation** and corrupts his knowledge of God by denying that He is the Creator, **man owes his very existence to God's constant sustaining power**.

²⁵ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., *Discovering Romans: Spiritual Revival for the Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 33.

See also, A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 1:21.

²⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 117.

Every breath, every heartbeat, every experience of goodness and grace **testifies to God** and this daily experience means that man may corrupt the knowledge of God, **but may never escape the knowledge of God.**

This experiential knowledge **does not include all that God reveals** in special revelation, but those who **observe the works of God in the world of God** cannot escape a real, but limited, knowledge of God.²⁷

Paul makes this statement **concessively** though, meaning that the words **“For even though they knew God...”** were intended to **summarise verses 19–20** and **add weight** to his next statement about man rejecting God.

So it is important to note that Paul understands man to have **sufficient knowledge to prevent him** from the **error of identifying any of the created things** with the Creator.²⁸

In other words, **man knows enough of God to keep his thinking about God free from idolatry.**

Turn to Acts 17 where we'll see how Paul explains this to **unbelieving Gentiles in Athens.**

²⁷ “People do have some knowledge of God. But this knowledge, Paul also makes clear, is limited, involving the narrow range of understanding of God available in nature: they ‘knew of God.’ The outward manifestation of God in his created works was met with a real, though severely limited, knowledge of him among those who observed those works.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Second Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 117.

²⁸ Bruce, *Romans*, 91.

As he contends with the **wise men of the Areopagus**, Paul refers to God creating the world in **verse 24**—

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands

He also includes **God's work of sustaining life** in **verse 25**—

nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things

Thus far, Paul has mentioned **God creating and sustaining** everything which, according to **Romans 1**, means that man is without excuse because he knows God.

As Paul continues, he says in **verse 26** that God has sovereignly ordained the details of our lives so that, as Paul says in **verse 27**—

that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.

That is, **as man has an experiential knowledge of God**, it **should lead him to seek an effective knowledge** of God through special revelation.

Despite this, the Athenians **worshipped an “unknown God”** according to **verse 23**.

Though they knew enough of God to **keep their thinking about God free from idolatry**, they nevertheless **corrupted their knowledge and worship** in the idolatry of polytheism.

So man has no excuse for the corruption of his worship.

In fact, the corruption of man's worship is **a proof and an indictment** of man's rejection of God.

As **one author** notes, "*Paganism itself is the proof that the human mind had really conceived the notion of God; for this notion appears at the root of all the varied forms of paganism.*"²⁹

To say that differently, the corruption of man's worship is proof of the corruption of man's knowledge of God.

As Paul continues in **Romans 1:21**, he explains that man's **response to God's message** in creation is **sinfully rebellious**
...they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks...

The corruption of man's knowledge of God leads to the corruption of his worship of God because he **fails to respond to God** by **honouring Him and praising Him** for His perfections.

Similarly, man also **fails to respond to God** by **acknowledging** that every good thing he enjoys comes from God.

That is what Paul referred to in **Acts 14:17**—

[God] did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness.

²⁹ Frédéric Louis Godet, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. A. Cusin, ed. Talbot W. Chambers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1881), 1:173.

What is key here is to recognise that **failing to glorify God is the root sin.**

Here glorifying God is **virtually equivalent** with rendering Him proper worship.³⁰

So as **one commentator** stated, *“The basic issue here is one of worship, for that is at the heart of the sin problem.”*³¹

We can now understand that in **verse 18**, the truth that people are unrighteously suppressing and rejecting is that **the one true God should be worshiped and obeyed as God.**

As **that same author** continued, *“If people would acknowledge God as God, and recognise that they are His creatures, they would be well on the way to true worship.”*³²

However, **man does not acknowledge God to be God**, and so the corruption of worship begins with man responding to God’s invitation to worship Him with **a resounding refusal.**

As Paul states here in **verse 21**, it is our **irreverence for who God is** and our **ingratitude for what He has done** that **characterises our corrupted worship.**

So the first step in the corruption of worship is **the rejection of God.**

³⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 96.

³¹ Man, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 27.

³² *Ibid.*, 28.

2. THE CORRUPTION OF MAN (21–22)

As Paul continues in **verse 21**, we discover that the **second step** in the corruption of man's worship is **the corruption of man**—

they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, **but they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened.**

The result of man's rejection of God is not only the corruption of his worship of God but **the very corruption of man himself.**

The corruption of worship **leads inescapably** to the corruption of man.

As a general principle, we see here that when people reject truth it becomes **increasingly difficult for them to recognise and accept truth.**³³

This is because our rejection of God, our refusal to worship God, is **ultimately motivated by our desire to glorify man and worship self.**

As Paul explains, man's corruption is **rooted in his prideful decision to prefer his own reasoning** over the revelation of God.

³³ Cf. Thomas L. Constable, Dr. Constable's Expository Notes on Romans, (Plano, TX: Sonic Light, 2025), <https://soniclight.com/constable-notes/>, 44.

Man elevates himself as the arbiter of truth.³⁴

As an inescapable consequence, whenever people, in their conceit and ingratitude, **begin to reason on their own**, their foolish hearts are darkened.³⁵

So as we see in **verse 21**, Paul indicates that **the corruption of man centres on his mind and the ability to reason.**

In the two somewhat parallel statements, Paul says that the **effects** of corrupted worship are evident in our **“thoughts”** and our **“heart.”**

We tend to think of the **heart** as the centre of human emotion, and the **mind** of human reasoning, but biblically **the heart is viewed as the “control centre” of man.**

The heart refers then to the **inner being of man**, composed of **the mind** (what we know), **desires** (what we love), **and will** (what we choose).³⁶

So from Paul’s perspective, the **“heart”** is **general location of man’s corruption.**

He is being more specific, though, when he refers to the **“thoughts”** of man.

³⁴ “The fundamental doctrine of false worship is that humans are the arbiters and the measure of all things.” Man, Bibliotheca Sacra, 30.

³⁵ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 12–13, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 71.

³⁶ Cf. A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 21.

The Greek term for “**thoughts**” can also mean the “**process of reasoning.**”³⁷

In other words, Paul is referring to **the heart generally and to the mind specifically.**

He specifies **two descriptions** of the corruption that results from rejecting God.

First, man becomes “**futile**” in his mind, that is, his thoughts become pointless.³⁸

As one dictionary explains, it means for something to become useless and thereby worthless.³⁹

In short, **our thinking becomes nonsense because of sin.**

Second, man becomes “**darkened**” in his heart,

It is a figurative term meaning *to become unable to perceive and thus unable to understand.*⁴⁰

The mind of man, deprived of true understanding, becomes shrouded in darkness.

³⁷ BDAG, διαλογισμός.

³⁸ “The basic idea is that of pointlessness.” Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; InterVarsity Press, 1988), 84.

³⁹ Louw & Nida, 65.38, ματαιόομαι.

⁴⁰ Louw & Nida, 32.44, σκοτίζομαι.

Similarly, Paul refers to Gentiles in **Ephesians 4:18** as—
being darkened in their mind, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.

With this descriptive language, **Paul is painting a clear, though devastating, picture** of man's corruption.

Because of that corruption, **our natural capacity to reason accurately about God is quickly and permanently harmed.**⁴¹

As **one commentator** writes, "*The darkening to which this sentence testifies means that, even at its best, the thinking of fallen men is never perfectly objective.*"⁴²

While Paul has described the corruption of man's reasoning in his mind, **the broader corruption of his heart** means that **whatever he feels, thinks, says, or does** is detrimentally affected.

Our minds cannot reason straight, our desires cannot function properly, and our wills do not even try to obey God.

The most devastating result of this corruption, though, is that once man has rejected the worship of God, **he is no longer capable of truly rational thought about Him.**⁴³

⁴¹ Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 118.

⁴² Cranfield, *Romans*, ICC, 118, fn. 7.

⁴³ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Rev. ed., Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1991), 37.

Theologically, we refer to this corruption of man as the “noetic effects of sin.”

Jay Adams describes the noetic effects of sin when he writes that, “*The mind of man, as well as every other aspect of his being, has been adversely affected by sin.*”⁴⁴

The term emphasises that sin damages our ability to think correctly.

It does not mean that human thinking and reasoning is completely destroyed by sin, but it does mean that the corruption is particularly evidenced in wrong thoughts about God and his ways.⁴⁵

Paul further describes this corruption of man in verse 22—
Professing to be wise, they became fools

This is a further expression of man’s corrupted reasoning, because the phrase “professing to be” was fairly common Greek for describing claims that had no reasonable basis and were untrue.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Jay E. Adams, “Noetic Effects of Sin,” in *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 132.

⁴⁵ Cf. Gregg R. Allison, “Noetic Effect,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 148.

⁴⁶ Frank Thielman, Romans, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 106.

Simply, Paul is arguing that man **rationalises his sin and proves his utter foolishness** by **inventing and believing his own ideas or philosophies** about God, the universe, and himself.⁴⁷

The same idea is expressed in **Psalm 14:1**—

The wicked fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They act corruptly, they commit abominable deeds; There is no one who does good.

This means that **all false religions represent a rejection of the truth** and are **evidence of man’s deepest corruption**.⁴⁸

We have already noted the **six corruptions** of man’s knowledge of God, but now we have **greater insight to recognise them** in the society around us.

One example that we can now recognise as the corruption of man is **the idea or philosophy of “naturalism.”**

All forms of nontheisms are naturalistic, including pantheism, atheism, and agnosticism.⁴⁹

Naturalism, then, is **the philosophical theory that nature is all that exists**.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Cf. John F. MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible: New American Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), Ro 1:22.

⁴⁸ Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 119.

⁴⁹ Cf. Geisler, “Naturalism,” *Baker Encyclopedia*, 521.

⁵⁰ Cf. Evans, *Pocket Dictionary*, 79.

In other words, there is **no supernatural realm** or intervention in the world.

Simply, **naturalism rejects the knowledge of God** and instead prefers **irrational ideas such as Darwinian evolution**.

At the heart of this naturalistic ideology is a **desire to reject the worship of God for the worship of man**.

As authors **Darrell Harrison and Virgil Walker** explain—
“*Darwinian thought and philosophical naturalism laid the foundation for a worldview that denies God's hand in creation, and instead places man in control of the earth's destiny.*”⁵¹

This is the thinking behind the **climate change cult** that **masquerades as a scientific and moral cause** but, in reality, aims to **overthrow biblical truth** and distort the Christian's God-given role as steward.⁵²

As **Josh Buice** explains, “*This naturalistic perspective not only denies God's sovereignty but also fosters a form of earth worship that is fundamentally idolatrous.*”⁵³

As we now understand, the corruption of worship **begins with the rejection of God** which then **results in the corruption of man**.

Paul identifies **one further step**.

⁵¹ Darrell Harrison and Virgil Walker, *A Biblical Theology of Climate Change* (Cumming, GA: G3 Press, 2023), 22.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6.

3. THE REPLACEMENT OF GOD (23)

In **verse 23**, we see that the **third step** in the corruption of man's worship is **the replacement of God**—

...and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the likeness of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Here Paul plainly states that the corruption of man's worship of God is **evident in his replacement of God** with a **worthless idol**.

Verse 23 explains more precisely the foolishness of **verse 22**.

This foolishness consists fundamentally of **an irrational exchange** of the **most senseless and damaging kind**.⁵⁴

Man substitutes the worship of idols for the worship of the true God **because of the corruption of sin in his mind**.

In other words, man in his corruption is **desperate to invent and live by any kind of belief system** except the one that **requires humbling himself before his Creator**.⁵⁵

This replacement, or “**exchange**” as Paul terms it, **demonstrates man's irrational reasoning** since it is described as **insanity**.

⁵⁴ Thielman, *Romans*, 106.

⁵⁵ Cf. Man, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 30.

Quite simply, **Paul sees it as stupid** to make a god of one's own.⁵⁶

Paul's words are an **echo** of **Jeremiah 2:11** where **Yahweh laments Judah's idolatry**—

**Has a nation changed gods though they were not gods?
But My people have changed their glory for that which
does not profit.**

Similarly, in **Psalms 106:20** we read—

**Thus they exchanged their glory for the image of an ox
that eats grass.**

Paul communicates the **insanity of idolatry** with some **clever wordplay**.

“The glory of the incorruptible God” is **contrasted** with **“the likeness of corruptible man.”**

First, the **very real substance of God's glory** is contrasted the **vanity of what man replaces it with** in his worship—not even man himself, but the “likeness” of man.

The substance of God's glory is exchanged for something as **insignificant as a shadow, a poor copy of man** who is made in God's image.

Second, there is a contrast between **God as incorruptible** and man as corruptible.

⁵⁶ Morris, *Romans*, 86.

Though some translations render the contrast as **immortal and mortal**, Paul is expressing something **more significant**.

Paul is speaking not so much of **God being immortal and thus eternal**, but rather of God being incorruptible **in the sense of being totally immune to decay**.

That is striking when **contrasted with the corruptibility or decay** which is inseparable from our physical existence.

So “**the glory of the incorruptible God**” emphasises something both of **the greatness and the majesty of God**.⁵⁷

As we noted earlier, man rejects the worship of God **for the worship of man**.

Our refusal to worship God is **ultimately motivated by our desire to glorify and worship self**.

As **one commentator** noted, behind idolatry “*in all its forms, lies in the last resort the idolisation of the self.*”⁵⁸

In what seems to be an **intentional reference to the creation account** recorded in **Genesis**, Paul elaborates on man’s idolatry as he continues in **verse 23** that man worships—
an image in the likeness of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁸ Barrett, *Romans*, 37.

These words are, again, an **echo of the Old Testament** as we see in Moses' words of **Deuteronomy 4:16-18**, **warning Israel to take care—**

16 lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female,

17 the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky,

18 the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth

Sadly, Israel's worship was frequently **corrupted by idolatry**, as we see in **Ezekiel 8:10** as Yahweh showed the prophet a **vision of Israel's idolatry—**

So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts and detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around.

By alluding so clearly to the Old Testament, **Paul reminds us of the effects of idolatry.**

In **Psalm 115:8** we are warned—

Those who make [idols] will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.

Again in **Psalm 135:18**—

Those who make [idols] will be like them, all who trust in them.

Or as the author describes Israel's idolatry in **2 Kings 17:15**—

They followed vanity and became vain...

As **one author** puts it, “*Their idolatrous minds and practices are themselves a punishment from God.*”⁵⁹

In other words, though man’s replacement of God in idolatry is **the second reason** for God's wrath, it is also the **demonstration of God's wrath**.

Men's replacement of God **explains both the WHY and the HOW of God's wrath**, as Paul will elaborate in the next section with the repeated phrase, “**God gave them over...**”

We see this in our culture and in society in many ways, but one clear example is what theologians call **neopaganism**.

Neopaganism—**literally the “new-paganism”**—is a revival of ancient paganism.

As **Norman Geisler** points out, “*It is a form of polytheism that arose in the wake of the ‘death of God’ movement of the 20th century.*”⁶⁰

This is most famously connected with **Friedrich Nietzsche** who wrote, “**God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him,**” referring to their boast in atheism.

This perfectly illustrates what Paul has been explaining, as men rejected God they became corrupted in their knowledge of God, with the result that they became corrupted themselves in their thinking.

⁵⁹ Barrett, *Romans*, 37.

⁶⁰ Geisler, “Neopaganism,” *Baker Encyclopedia*, 522–523.

In their corruption, they replaced God in their hearts as their worship was corrupted in idolatry.

Neopaganism is the idolatry of creation, and ultimately of man himself.

We find examples of neopaganism in **witchcraft, occultism, and other New Age religions.**

As **Phil Johnson** warns, New Age neopaganism has seen people delve into wicca (a modern form of witchcraft), spiritism, shamanism,... yoga, and Druidism.

It's popularly expresses in the belief in **reincarnation, karma, the chakra, and Nirvana.**⁶¹

Man's irrational and rebellious replacement of the worship of God with the **worship of idols** is the **third step** in the corruption of man's worship.

⁶¹ Johnson, *SBJT*, 78.

CONCLUSION

As we conclude, Paul has explained the corruption of worship **in three steps**:

1. The rejection of God
2. The corruption of man
3. The replacement of God

It is this corrupted worship—man’s replacement of God in idolatry—that is **the second reason for God's wrath**.

Man’s corrupted worship of idols instead of God the Creator is **WHY God responds** to human rebellion with the just punishment of His righteous wrath.

As we consider the significance of what we have learnt, this text **explains the paganism of our day** and all of its perversions.

It helps us understand the world we live in and why our culture is marred by human depravity.

For us as Christians, the corruption of worship **also motivates us in the true, faithful worship of God**.

In order to worship God as Creator, we must turn in **repentance from our natural inclination to idolatry**.

We need to have our **minds renewed the Holy Spirit and Scripture** in order to **think rightly about God** so that we will devote ourselves to **glorifying God with gratitude**.

BENEDICTION

Romans 16:20

**The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.
The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.**

Romans 1:21–23 LSB

1:21

For even though they knew God,
 they did not glorify Him as God
 or give thanks,
 but they became futile in their thoughts,
 and their foolish heart was darkened.

1:22

they became fools,
 and exchanged
 the glory of
 an image in
 the incorruptible God

1:23

for the likeness of corruptible man
 and of birds
 and four-footed animals
 and crawling creatures.

Concessive of 20b–e

Reasons for 20f

Contrast and result of 21b–c

Concessive of 22b

Explains/ expands 21d–e

Means/ instruments of 23a

Sermon Notes

Introduction

Six corruptions of the true knowledge of God:

- a. Pantheism
- b. Panentheism
- c. Polytheism
- d. Monotheism
- e. Deism
- f. Nontheism:
 - Atheism
 - Agnosticism

As we study Romans 1:21–23, Paul explains the corruption of man's worship in three steps:

1. The rejection of God (21)
2. The corruption of man (21–22)
3. The replacement of God (23)

1. The rejection of God (21)

2. The corruption of man (21–22)

Illustration: Naturalism.

3. The replacement of God (23)

Illustration: Neopaganism.

Conclusion