

Romans 1:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

Analysis

And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

Paul describes the essence of idolatry: *kai ἔλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ αὐτοῦ θεοῦ εἰκόνης φθαρτοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ πετεινῶν καὶ τετραπόδων καὶ ἐρπετῶν*, 'and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image of corruptible man, and birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things').

Ἐλλαξαν (ἔλλαξαν, exchanged) is a commercial term—humanity traded the infinitely valuable for the worthless. Τὴν δόξαν τοῦ αὐτοῦ θεοῦ (τὴν δόξαν τοῦ αὐτοῦ θεοῦ, the glory of the incorruptible God) refers to God's eternal, unchanging, radiant majesty. They exchanged this for *homoiōmati eikonos phthartou* (όμοίωμα εἰκόνης φθαρτοῦ, an image/likeness of corruptible things). The descending order—man, birds, quadrupeds, reptiles—echoes Genesis 1 in reverse, a de-creation. Humanity, made in God's image (Genesis 1:27), now worships images of creatures. This is cosmic insanity—the creature worshiping the creature rather than the Creator. It violates the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6) and Deuteronomy 4:15-19.

Historical Context

Ancient idolatry was pervasive. Egyptians worshiped animal-headed gods (Anubis, Horus). Greeks fashioned anthropomorphic deities (Zeus, Aphrodite). Romans adopted these, adding emperor worship. Jewish readers would recall Israel's golden calf (Exodus 32), making an image 'like a calf that eats grass' (Psalm 106:19-20). Temples with statues, shrines, and household idols saturated the Roman world. Paul's audience in Rome would have walked past countless such images daily. Modern idolatry is subtler—self, money, pleasure, power—but equally destructive.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. What are you tempted to 'exchange' (ἀλλάσσω) the glory of God for—what created things rival God's supreme worth in your life?
2. How does idolatry involve not just addition (adding false gods) but exchange (replacing the true God)?
3. What modern idols do Christians rationalize or disguise that are spiritually equivalent to ancient statues?

Interlinear Text

καὶ ἤλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ ἐν
And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into
G2532 G236 G3588 G1391 G3588 G862 G2316 G1722

όμοιώματι εἰκόνος φθαρτοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ πετεινῶν
made like an image to corruptible man And to birds
G3667 G1504 G5349 G444 G2532 G4071

καὶ τετραπόδων καὶ ἐρπετῶν
And fourfooted beasts And creeping things
G2532 G5074 G2532 G2062

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 106:20 (Glory): Thus they changed their glory into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass.

Jeremiah 2:11 (Glory): Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.

Acts 17:29 (References God): Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Romans 1:25 (References God): Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

Ezekiel 8:10 (Parallel theme): So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, pourtrayed upon the wall round about.

1 Peter 4:3 (Parallel theme): For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries:

Deuteronomy 5:8 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth:

Isaiah 44:13 (Parallel theme): The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house.

Isaiah 40:18 (References God): To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?

Isaiah 40:26 (Creation): Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth.