

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 1: 21-23, 24a, 26a, 28a

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. This week, we are going to read Romans Chapter 1 verse 21 to verse 23, 24a, 26a, and 28a.

Paul wanted to present that Christ has accomplished the judicial redemption for us. He began with the matter of condemnation—man must first recognize that he is a sinner and has no way to save himself; only then will he turn to seek the salvation of Christ. Paul intended to prove that all have sinned and are condemned by God. He very logically used two standards—godliness and righteousness—to evaluate man. He first addressed those who are ungodly and unrighteous—those who do not worship God and are unjust toward others.

Paul first brought up God's common revelation, that through observing God's creation of the universe and the earth, as well as all the living things within it, man is able to see God's eternal power and divine nature. This is clearly evident and leaves people without excuse. Common revelation allows people to recognize that there is a God, but this alone is not enough. Knowing that there is a God, and even believing in Him, cannot save a person. As it says in James 2:19, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" Even the devil believes in God, but he believes with fear and trembling. God is righteous, holy, and glorious, and He dwells in unapproachable light. Man must have a way to come before God—and Jesus Christ is that way. Because He sacrificed Himself and bore the price of our sins, we have the standing to come before God. This is special grace.

Common grace allows people to know that there is a God—this is the first step. Special grace enables a person, through the way of Jesus, to come before God. However, before a person can receive special grace, they must first recognize that they are sinful and already under condemnation. Only then can they come to Christ to seek the grace of forgiveness. Today, following Paul's logic, we will examine how

an ungodly and unrighteous person, after seeing God's common grace, falls under God's condemnation.

Verse 21: “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.”

This verse we already read yesterday, so we won't go into detail today—only the conclusion will be presented. A person who comes to know of God through common grace, yet does not regard God as God, does not glorify Him, nor give Him thanks. This leads to a serious consequence: his thoughts become futile; a better translation would be, “his reasoning becomes futile.” That is, when objective evidence is placed before him, he is unable to use rational thinking to arrive at a correct conclusion.

Of course, the correct conclusion should be that when one recognizes there is a God, one ought to place God first in their life. That would be a reasonable conclusion. But when he rejects this reasonable conclusion, his reasoning becomes futile—meaning he can no longer think rationally. As a result, his heart becomes darkened. The heart here includes not only thoughts but also emotional preferences and decisions of the will. He begins to indulge in his own lusts and makes wrong decisions. His heart becomes darkened, and his whole being falls into darkness. Dear brothers and sisters, isn't this the very condition each one of us was in before we were saved?

Verse 22: “Professing to be wise, they became fools.”

This person claims to be wise, yet true wisdom comes from God and is connected to God. With God, there exists an absolute value standard, and based on this standard, a complete system of thought is established, enabling man to follow this system and come before God. When man does not take God as the center and

abandons this absolute value standard, he considers himself wise and builds a man-centered system of thought. The characteristic of this system is that everything becomes relative—there is no absolute good and no absolute evil.

A relative value system may work well in certain specific matters, but it cannot be applied to everything. It may be suitable for a particular period of time, but it cannot be used in all times. He thinks himself wise, but in reality, he is foolish. There is nothing to fear in being foolish, for if a person knows he is foolish, he will seek help from the wise. What is most fearful is that a person is clearly foolish but believes himself to be wise. Such a person becomes stubborn and self-willed, and he continues down a wrong path to the very end. The result is what we see in verse 23.

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

When a person engages in futile reasoning, it leads to man-centered thinking that considers itself wise. The result is that the glory of the incorruptible God is exchanged for an image. Paul tells us here how idols are formed. Through common revelation, man comes to know that there is a God. God is incorruptible and full of glory, and man ought to treat God as God—meaning to worship Him, heed His commands, and submit to His guidance.

But man only wants to receive the benefits from God without wanting to be governed by Him. As a result, he turns the living, dynamic, and freely operating God into a mere image—like a photograph. A photograph is dead, static, and incapable of action. When man lifts up this photo and says, “This is God,” it becomes an idol.

Hebrews 1:3 says, “Who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person...” Common grace allows man to know there is a God. If a person genuinely seeks God, the next step is to receive Christ as the Savior of his life—this is special grace, which reveals the love of God. God is glorious, and Christ is the radiance that shines forth from that glory. The best analogy is that of the sun and

sunlight: God is the Sun of righteousness, and Christ is the radiance that shines from the Sun.

We know that the sun is a massive ball of fire, with a core of extreme heat and pressure, filled with hydrogen gas. Hydrogen atoms undergo nuclear fusion to form helium, releasing vast amounts of energy. If we observe the surface of the sun, it is constantly changing and emitting intense light. Christ is like that radiance—the brightness of God's glory. This radiance is full of power, dimensional, dynamic, and constantly active without ceasing.

If we take a photo of the sun's surface, it becomes a flat image—yet every second the surface is different. That one photo captures only a specific moment, from a specific angle, at a specific time. It's like someone, at a particular time, experiencing a unique event, has a touching encounter with Christ—a manifestation of Christ. That moment is like taking a snapshot. But then some ignorant people insist that this snapshot is Christ Himself, and thus that image becomes an idol.

Christ is the express image of God's being. The essence of God is living, vibrant, dynamic, and beyond definition. Man's problem is that he sees one aspect or experiences one moment and assumes that is the whole of God—then vainly tries to grasp God's glory in his own hands. But what he grasps is not God—it is an idol. Such occurrences are common throughout human civilization.

Some people idolize other human beings—like Mazu or Guan Gong in Chinese culture. These were good people, virtuous people, even great figures. They did indeed manifest some noble qualities that God has bestowed upon mankind, and they are worthy of admiration. But they cannot represent God, and they certainly are not God. If we worship them as God, we are committing idolatry. In some more primitive societies, people are trapped in painful environments they cannot overcome. Some long to soar above their surroundings like birds; others long to conquer their conditions like lions. So people carve images of birds and beasts and worship them. All these are idols—they are not the true God.

The Chinese Union Version (CUV) translates the word as “insects,” which sounds more refined, but the original word is “creeping things”—that is, reptiles on the

ground such as snakes, lizards, centipedes, and so on. This reveals the darker side of humanity. When man's reasoning becomes futile and his heart darkened, he begins to exalt lawlessness and elevate things that are evil and corrupt. Not only does he himself fall into darkness, but he also leads others into darkness. They begin to worship all kinds of creeping things and become followers of Satan. The ungodly and unrighteous do not worship God as God, but instead establish idols for themselves. Today, let us first look at their outcome. In the next couple of days, we will look at the details. Let's read the first part of verses 24, 26, and 28.

Verse 24: "Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness,"

Verse 26: "God gave them up to vile passions."

Verse 28: "God gave them over to a debased mind."

First, we see that all three of these verses contain the phrase "God gave them up." The Greek word for "gave up" is *paradidomi*, which is made up of two parts: *para*, meaning "aside," and *didomi*, meaning "to give." Together, it means "to give over to the side," or "to set aside." God gave them over, He set them aside—He no longer restrained them. This is the greatest punishment God can give to man. When people no longer regard God as God, and even carve idols for themselves and create gods in their own image, in the end, God gives them up to do what they desire. God no longer contends with them. At that point, man enters into the most dangerous condition. C.S. Lewis once said, people insist on the freedom to depart from God, but when they finally get it, they become eternal slaves to themselves. Therefore, being given up is the greatest judgment God can bring upon man.

Second, we notice that God's giving up is progressive—it increases in severity. This shows that God is still full of mercy and continues to give people opportunities to repent and return. In verses 24, 26, and 28, we see three levels of God's giving up. The first level is in verse 24: God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts. The Chinese Union Version translates this as "lusts," but the Greek word is *epithumia*, which also consists of two parts: *epi*, meaning "focus on," and *thumia*, meaning "desire." So, the word means an intense, focused desire. It can be good or bad. Therefore, translating it as "lust" may be too strong; a more accurate translation

would be “desire.” Of course, if this desire excludes God, the result will inevitably be evil. But from the standpoint of God’s giving up, this first level is that God allows people to do the things they intensely desire to do. This is the first stage of God’s judgment: giving them over to the desires of their own hearts.

The second level of God’s giving up is in verse 26: God gave them up to vile passions, or as it can also be translated, God gave them over to shameful lusts. The Greek word for “passions” here is *pathos*, which is translated in English as “lust”—that is, passionate desire. But this word is preceded by an adjective: “shameful.” This indicates that these desires are unnatural, corrupt, and disgraceful—things that bring shame. This is the second level of God’s judgment upon man.

The third level is found in verse 28: God gave them over to a debased mind. The NIV translates this as a “depraved mind,” pointing not so much to the heart, but to the mind—specifically the thoughts and reasoning. A more accurate translation would be: “God gave them over to a corrupt mind.” This is very similar to how God decided to judge the ancient world with a flood. In Genesis 6:5, it says, “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Because man’s thoughts and intentions were continually evil, God brought judgment through the flood. The thoughts and reasoning of a person determine the kind of life they live. When a person’s daily thoughts are all evil—constantly scheming for selfish gain at the expense of others—this marks the final level of God’s giving up: allowing them to be entirely given over to evil thoughts, where the conscience no longer has any function in them.

In the ancient world, this kind of condition led to the judgment of the flood, which destroyed all people of that generation except for Noah and his family—eight people in all—who were saved through the ark. Now, at the end of this present age, if God begins to give people over to depraved minds, it is a sign that judgment is near. It means the time of Jesus’ return is drawing close.

In these three verses, we see three levels of God’s giving over. When people willingly fall into sin, God is still full of mercy. First, He gives them over to follow the

desires of their hearts; then He gives them over to indulge in shameful lusts; and finally, He gives them over to a depraved mind. When we see the moral decay in today's society, we should not be quick to judge. Instead, we need to recognize that within these three levels of God's giving over, God is full of mercy and continually gives people opportunities to repent. We hope that we can be sensitive to God's heart and seize the opportunity to preach the gospel, so that those who have already come to know God's common grace may also accept God's special grace—that is, accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior for life.

Let us pray together: Lord, we were once irreverent and ungodly. Thank You for Your grace that enabled us to hear the gospel, gave us the wisdom to be saved, and made us willing to confess and repent, accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior for life. As we see the society around us becoming increasingly corrupt, we know Your return is near and the door of grace is about to close. Help us grasp the opportunity to share the gospel with those around us who do not yet know You. Bless the church where I belong to be a gateway for the gospel, helping people recognize that they are sinners and can only be saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. Bless the church's gospel ministry. We pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!