

Three Things That Darken the Heart

Romans 1:21–22 (NASB 1995)

“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.”

Introduction

Let me begin with a little tongue-in-cheek advice.

If you want your heart to become dark, foolish, and miserable, follow these three simple steps.

First, **make yourself the center of your life**. When things go well, don't think about God. Don't give Him glory. Take all the credit to yourself. Tell yourself, “I did this. I deserve this.”

Second, **stop giving thanks**. Take God's blessings for granted. Don't thank God. Don't thank your spouse, your family, or your friends. Just assume that everything you have is something you deserve.

Third, **spend your time and energy on things that don't really matter**. Debate them. Argue about them. Make them bigger than they really are.

Do those three things long enough, and something will begin to happen inside you. Your heart will become darker. You will become more self-centered, less grateful, more frustrated, and farther away from God. You become a fool in God's eyes.

Of course, none of us wants that.

We want hearts that are full of light, gratitude, and joy—hearts that are close to God, wise, and sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

And Romans 1:21 shows us how a heart can become darkened.

Paul warns us about three things that darken our hearts: **when we stop glorifying God, when we stop giving thanks, and when we become absorbed in futile thinking**.

Let's look at them one at a time.

1. Self-Glory Darkens the Heart

Paul says, “Even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God” (v. 21)

The problem was not that they had never heard of God. They knew God. But they did not give Him His rightful place.

The KJV says, “they glorified him not as God.” That is the issue.

Anyone can claim that they know God, but it is not the same as glorifying God.

To glorify God means to recognize His worth and give Him His rightful place in our lives.

We glorify God when we worship Him, praise Him, thank Him, testify about His goodness, and live in a way that honors Him.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “*Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*”

Notice those words: **whatever you do.**

We don't glorify God only when we are in church. We glorify Him at home. At work. In our relationships. In our conversations. In how we use our money. In how we treat other people.

The opposite is self-glory.

Self-glory says, “Look at me.”

God-glory says, “Look at Him.”

And when you constantly put yourself at the center, your heart begins to turn away from God.

Think about it. Sometimes we may know God, believe in God, and even come to church regularly, but God can still become an afterthought.

When everything is going well, we may not think about Him very much. Then when a crisis comes, suddenly we pray.

But God doesn't want to be merely our emergency contact. He wants to be the center of our lives.

So, ask yourself today: **Am I glorifying God, or am I glorifying myself?**

Remember: self-glory darkens the heart.

2. Ingratitude Darkens the Heart

Paul continues: “*Neither were thankful*” (v. 21).

What a simple statement—and what a serious one.

The Bible repeatedly calls us to thanksgiving. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, “in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Why is thanksgiving so important?

Because gratitude changes the direction of our hearts. Gratitude points to the Giver of all blessings, not to us.

When we give thanks, we look beyond ourselves and recognize the Giver. Behind every blessing, there's God the Author and the Giver.

Every good thing we have ultimately comes from God. Our life, our health, our family, our daily provision, our salvation, our friendships, our opportunities, and even the ability to enjoy the blessings of life—all of these should turn our hearts toward the One who gives them.

I recently came across a story about Joe Espada, manager of the Houston Astros.

A reporter asked him about a difficult stretch his team was experiencing as losses were piling up. “*He responded with a smile: ‘What's tough about it? With all the things going on in the world, and my 10-year-old autistic daughter — the challenges she faces, her struggles, her kindness, she's always thinking about others — what's tough about it?’ He added, ‘God's will is perfect. I'm grateful for the life He's given me.’*” (Christianity Today, September/October 2026, p. 51.)

What a perspective.

His circumstances were not perfect. His team was struggling. His family faced challenges. But his heart was still filled with gratitude to the Giver.

That's the difference.

Remember: Thanksgiving doesn't mean that everything is good. It means that God is still good.

Sometimes we think we will become thankful when our circumstances improve.

But the Bible teaches us to cultivate thanksgiving even in difficult circumstances.

When we stop giving thanks, our hearts slowly become darker. We begin to focus on what we don't have instead of what we do have. We complain more. We compare more. We become dissatisfied.

But the opposite is also true.

When we practice thanksgiving, our hearts are turned toward the light, and we begin to walk in it.

So, ask yourself: **What am I taking for granted that I should be thanking God for?**

Perhaps today we simply need to stop and say, "Lord, thank You."

3. Futile Thinking Darkens the Heart

Paul then says:

"They became futile in their speculations" (v. 21).

Note here: self-centeredness and the lack of gratitude lead us to empty and unproductive speculations.

People can spend enormous amounts of time and energy thinking about things that ultimately don't matter very much.

And Christians can do this, too.

There are many legitimate questions Christians discuss: baptism, communion, Bible translations, the timing of Christ's return, and many other theological subjects.

These questions can be worthwhile. But there is a danger when secondary issues become more important to us than the things that matter most.

We can spend hours arguing about a subject and forget to love the person standing right in front of us.

We can become experts at winning arguments while becoming poor at loving our neighbors.

We can know how to defend our position but forget how to live out our faith.

Paul reminds us in Colossians 3:2, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”

We need to ask ourselves: **What is really worth my time, my energy, and my attention?**

For me personally, I have tried to keep my goal simple.

As a believer, my goal is to **love the Lord and love my neighbor as myself.**

And as a preacher, my goal is to **preach God's Word in truth and live it out daily.**

Those are the things I want to keep in front of me.

Because sometimes the best way to protect our hearts from darkness is simply to keep our eyes on what matters most.

Conclusion

Romans 1:21 gives us a sobering progression.

They knew God, but they did not glorify Him.

They were not thankful.

They became futile in their thinking.

And then Paul says, **“their foolish heart was darkened.”**

Notice that the darkness did not come all at once.

It began with the heart turning away from God.

And that is why we need to guard our hearts.

Proverbs 4:23 says: “Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.”

Our hearts affect how we worship, how we think, how we make decisions, how we respond to circumstances, and ultimately how we live.

So how do we keep our hearts in the light?

Let me turn Paul's three warnings into three simple practices.

First, glorify God.

Give Him His rightful place. Don't make yourself the center. Honor Him with your wealth. Glorify Him in your worship, your words, your work, and your daily life. Do all to the glory of God.

Second, give thanks.

Don't take God's blessings for granted. Every day, stop and name five things for which you are grateful.

Third, focus on what matters.

Set your mind on the things above. Spend more time in God's Word and less time becoming consumed by things that have no eternal value.

So, this week, bring light into your heart.

Glorify God.

Give thanks.

Focus on what matters eternally.

The world is already full of enough darkness.

We don't need to add to it by putting ourselves at the center, living without gratitude, or becoming consumed with things that don't matter most.

Instead, let us keep our eyes on the Lord.

Let us walk in His light.

And let us live with hearts that are grateful, focused, and fully turned toward God.

**“Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.”**

Amen.

Reflect and Discuss

1. What tends to compete with God for the center of your life?

In what ways might self-focus, success, recognition, or the desire to control things keep you from glorifying God? What would it look like to give God His rightful place in that area of your life?

2. What are you most likely to take for granted?

Think about your family, health, relationships, work, daily provisions, or spiritual blessings. How might intentionally practicing thanksgiving change your attitude and help keep your heart from becoming darkened?

3. Are there things that occupy your thoughts and energy that matter less than the things of God?

What conversations, arguments, worries, or pursuits tend to consume your attention? How could you redirect your mind toward God, His Word, your love for others, and the things that matter eternally?