

"THE BLIND FOLLY OF IDOLATRY"

When we confess our faith using the words of the Nicene Creed, we begin by saying that "We believe in *one* God, the Father Almighty." When we say those words, we are asserting that there is no other god in whom we should place our trust, no other deity to whom we should devote our service and worship. Now, I doubt that any of you have ever felt a strong temptation to worship Baal or put your hope in Allah. Nevertheless, as you have probably heard before, idolatry can take a variety of forms. In fact, we saw this in today's reading of the law, where it said that *covetousness* is idolatry. (see Eph. 5:5) Covetousness is idolatry because idolatry stems from the craving to have the good things of this world on our own terms. As Calvin puts it, "For what is idolatry if not this: to worship the gifts in place of the Giver himself?" [*Institutes*, 4.17.36]

Another way of thinking about idolatry is to see it as an attempt by man to imagine a god who suits man's preferences and serves man's purposes. Listen to how this is described by J. Gresham Machen:

"Religion, men say, is a useful thing; it must be promoted in the interests of the state or in the interests of the community; God is the servant of man. Instead of seeking God first and testing our plans

by his revealed will, we make our plans first and drag God in to help us carry them out. Religion ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a mere means to an end." [*God Transcendent*, 24]

The idolater creates a god who serves human ends, ends which are sometimes material, sometimes political, and sometimes even humanitarian. We are especially tempted towards idolatry during times of crisis, times when everything around us seems to be falling apart. At such times, it is very tempting to place your trust in a god whose goals line up perfectly with yours.

The people of God in Isaiah's day were facing a serious crisis. The survival of their nation was in jeopardy. And this passage was written to show them the sheer folly of placing their trust in any god that is the product of the human imagination. These verses show us the way to overcome the allure of idolatry. They show us that *God's people overcome idolatry by seeing the powerlessness of idols and the glorious grace of the true and living God, the God who is our Rock and our Redeemer.*

The Lord Alone Is God

In the first part of this passage, the Lord emphasizes the fact that he is the only true and living God. Biblical religion is uncompromisingly monotheistic. There is only one God, the God who has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures that bear witness to him. As you know, this assertion is offensive to many people in our culture, a culture in which it is popular to believe that the different religions of the world are really just different paths to the same God. I recently saw an advertisement in a newspaper that said that you might be a Unitarian Universalist if you find wisdom in the teachings of Moses, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed in a non-exclusivistic sense. That is right on the mark. A person who sees different religions as equally helpful ways of seeking the same God is not a Christian but a universalist.

God describes himself in these verses by saying, "I am the first and I am the last." That is, he has existed from before the beginning of time and he will continue to exist when this world comes to its appointed end. He is completely independent of the world that he has made. He is self-existing, standing above history.

At the same time, he is also the one who guides and controls history. He has appointed a people for salvation and has guided their history from days of old.

He declares what is yet to come long before it happens. He makes promises to his people and he keeps those promises. This is why God says that we are his witnesses. If you are a Christian, then you can bear witness to the fact that the Lord is faithful to everything that he has promised in his Word. You can testify that he is your Rock and your Redeemer. Your salvation is grounded upon something solid and trustworthy. Unlike the non-Christians around you, your hope is not based upon sheer fantasy. Your faith is not merely a matter of believing something because it makes you feel good in the midst of life's uncertainties. Your hope is in the God who is really there. He is not a figment of your imagination. And you have been given the great privilege of testifying on his behalf before the people of this world.

Nevertheless, there are times in our lives when, even as Christians, we get worried and afraid. It is natural for us to be afraid when we perceive approaching evil or impending danger. But our Lord tells us not to be afraid of what the people of this world are afraid of. We are not to have a fear that is only concerned with self-preservation. Our security is not in the things of this world. For this reason, we are not to respond to the things that threaten us by coming up with our own solutions, but by seeking to honor the Lord and by trusting that he will keep us in his care. As Isaiah said back in chapter 8, we are to let the Lord of

hosts be our fear. The most effective means for extinguishing sinful fear is the fear of the Lord. The fear of God swallows up the fear of man.

Idols Are Nothing

In the second part of our passage, Isaiah issues a taunt against idols and those who worship them. He begins by pointing out how idolatry is an inversion of the truth. The Bible tells us that God created man after his own image, but the idolater fashions a god according to his own preferences. Any time we place our own conception of who God is and how he works over what he has revealed about himself in his Word, we are engaging in idolatry. This is why it is so important for us to be people of the Word. When we refuse to listen to what the Lord says about himself in the Bible, we will inevitably turn to false conceptions of God to find security, comfort, and happiness.

Isaiah takes a great deal of space in this passage to demonstrate the utter foolishness of idolatry. He says that the craftsman becomes hungry, that his strength fails, and that he grows faint. He says that the same tree that furnishes material for making an idol also provides fuel for a fire. If the person who makes an idol is so weak, then why should we think that the idol is any better? If the same piece of wood can be used to create an idol and to cook dinner, then what is

so special about the idol? We laugh at this, but we have to remember that it applies to modern forms of idolatry as well. Any time a person puts his trust in the things of this world, any time he imagines god to be what he wants him to be, he is engaging in the same kind of folly that Isaiah describes in these verses.

In verse 18, Isaiah calls our attention to the blindness that is bound up with idolatry. What makes idolatry so tragic is that those who are engaged in it cannot see it for what it is. They cannot see their folly. The Lord judges them by giving them over to their blindness. They become just like the gods in which they place their trust. Like their carved statues, they have eyes, but they are not able to see. They have ears, but they are not able to hear. And because of this, the idolater is in bondage. In the words of one commentator, "The idolater holds his idol, the product of his own strength,...but the reality is that the idol now holds him and he cannot break free from the bondage of the lie." [Motyer, 349]

There are many people in our culture, many who would identify themselves as Christians, who are placing their trust in gods of their own imagining instead of the God of the Bible. They think that their conception of god is more relevant and more helpful, as well as less demanding, than the God of the Bible. But these false gods are no different than the idols that Isaiah scorns in these verses. They cannot save. They cannot satisfy. In the words of J. Gresham Machen,

“When will men see that nothing but truth can satisfy the longing of the human soul? Religious conceptions which are merely useful and not eternally true are not useful at all... Men are feverishly saying to a god manufactured to serve the social needs of man: ‘Deliver me; for thou art a god.’... When will the vain effort cease?... Shall we continue to stagger like drunken men? Shall we still fashion a divinity that shall serve our utilitarian ends? Shall we amuse ourselves with idols? Or shall we return unto God?” [*God Transcendent*, 27]

Machen’s questions confront us every bit as much as they confront our non-Christian neighbors. We need to remember that the reason why Isaiah issued this taunt against idolatry was because God’s people were being seriously tempted, in a time of great crisis, to put their hope in manmade religion. Christians today face the same kind of temptation. We are being tempted to fashion our own god, a god who will serve as a means to some this-worldly end. We are being confronted by circumstances that make us more aware of how unstable this world really is, and it is easy for us to respond to this with fear. It is

easy for us to look to the things of this world for a solid place to stand. But we have to see the folly of doing that. We need to see that that is no different than crying out to a piece of firewood, 'Deliver me, for you are my god!'

The Lord Redeems His People

The third part of our passage begins with the Lord telling us to "Remember these things." What things? The things that have been said in the first two parts of this passage. We need to remember that the Lord alone is the all-sufficient God. And we need to remember that it is utterly foolish to bow down to a manmade god. Both of these points are underscored by what God says in the second half of verse 21: "I formed you." While an idol is formed by the hands of men, the Lord is the one who forms his people.

Consider the promise that is given at the end of verse 21. God says, "you will not be forgotten by me." There may be times in your life when you feel like God has forgotten you. Perhaps you continue to struggle with the same old sin and you have serious doubts about whether the Lord forgives you. Perhaps you are going through a time of trial and you feel like you cannot find any relief. Perhaps you have prayed the same prayer again and again but God doesn't seem to be answering. Whenever you begin to wonder if the Lord has forgotten you,

remember the promise that he makes in verse 21. Better yet, remember how he expresses the same promise later on in this book of prophecy, where he says, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15)

In verse 22, we see the reason why God can say that he will never forget us. He can give us this promise because he has redeemed us from our sins. Christ has paid the price that was required to purchase you out of your slavery to sin. If you trust in Jesus Christ, then your sins have been blotted out in the sight of God. Yes, God calls you to return to him when you stray, but the basis of that call to repentance is the fact that he has taken the initiative to redeem you. God says, "return to me, for I have redeemed you."

Over the past decade, a number of things have taken place in our nation that have caused us to see more clearly how unstable this world really is. There were the terrorist attacks that took place ten years ago. Then hurricane Katrina came. Then the housing bubble burst. And today our nation's economy is in a serious

slump, with an unemployment rate of 9.1%. How will you respond to this time of uncertainty? Where will you place your trust? This passage in Isaiah was given for such a time as this. It shows you the folly of putting your hope in the things of this world. It warns you against treating God as a means to this-worldly ends. It assures you that, no matter what befalls you in this life, the Lord is your Rock and your Redeemer. God's promise to you, if your trust is in Christ, is that he will never forget you. Your sins have been blotted out. So turn your back on your idols. Return to Lord. Break forth into singing. Join all creation in glorifying God for the wonderful things that he has done for you.