

## Confronting the Attractions of Idolatry Then and Now<sup>1</sup>

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An idol is “an illegitimate object of worship,” and idolatry is a false or improper form of worship “involving reverential human acts of submission and homage before beings or objects in the place of the one true God.”<sup>2</sup> Yahweh had stressed: “There should never be to you other gods beside me. You should never make for yourself a graven image, any likeness that is in the heavens above or that is at the earth beneath or that is in the waters under the earth. You should never worship them or serve them” (Deut 5:7–9). Yet as Moses foresaw (4:25–26; 31:16–17), Israel secured their own punishment (8:19–20) by going after foreign gods in the land and following the customs of the nations (Judg 2:12; 2 Kgs 17:7–8).

While not recognized by many, the idolatry that old covenant prophets like Isaiah and Zephaniah confronted remains pervasive in our world today. Certainly, it is present in the fashioned idols of Hinduism, but it also appears in the more sophisticated practical atheism, materialism, and superstar veneration of the West. Paul charged those in Corinth professing allegiance to Christ, “Do not be idolaters” (1 Cor 10:7), and he warned them not to think “idolaters ... will inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9–10).

What made and makes idolatry so attractive?<sup>3</sup> At least seven features clarify why this false and dangerous worldview entices so many.

1. *Guaranteed.* Do you ever pray and feel that God is not there? Are you ever tempted to hope in more tangible things like people (Pss 118:9; 146:3) or money (49:5–6; 1 Tim 6:17)? An idol was a visible, physical representation that was considered to transmit the presence of a deity. Yet the one true God declared that idols are controlled by demons and that such gods are worthless nothings, being made of mere wood and holding no ultimate power (Deut 32:17).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, God made the luminaries not for objects of worship but as pointers to his providence (4:19; cf. Gen 1:14). Yahweh is spirit and is incomparable to anything he has made (Deut 4:12, 15–19; Isa 40:18–26; John 4:24). He created and creates all things and therefore knows all, guides all, and is present and active in all (Gen 1:1; Isa 45:7; Dan 2:21; Heb 1:3; Acts 17:24–28).<sup>5</sup> He alone can save and will work for those who wait for him (Isa 40:30–31; 43:11; 45:21; 64:4; cf. Rom 8:31–32).
2. *Works-oriented and covetous.* Are you ever prone toward self-righteousness or tempted with materialism? By offering food sacrifices to an idol, people believed they obligated the god to multiply their crops, fertility, cattle, etc. Paul called covetousness idolatry (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5), and this is because idolatrous “worship” is at its core a pursuit of prosperity or health as an earned wage for works done (Hos 2:12; 9:1; Mic 1:7; Rom 4:4). In

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 29; cf. G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart originally listed nine attractions, which I have here adapted and developed. See Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 450–54.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Isa 41:24, 29; 44:14–20; Jer 10:14–15; 1 Cor 8:4; 10:19–20.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Exod 4:11; Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6–8; Jer 10:11–13; Isa 42:5; 44:24; 46:9–10; 48:12–13; Rom 11:36; Eph 1:11; 4:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:3.

contrast, true worship excludes self-exalting boasts (Jer 9:23–24; Rom 3:27; 1 Cor 4:7)<sup>6</sup> and considers God to be the supreme treasure of reality who alone is worthy of worship (Matt 13:44–46; Rev 4:11). Idolatry is of no true profit (Jer 2:11–13; Isa 44:9; Rom 1:22–23), for false gods (Jer 10:11) and all earthly goods (Matt 6:19–20) will pass away. Furthermore, true life is found in God alone by faith in Christ (John 6:35; Eph 2:8–9), who calls us to renounce things of this world (Phil 3:7–8; Heb 12:1–2) and to pursue godliness with contentment (1 Tim 6:6).

3. *Easy*. Do you ever find it easier to please men rather than God or to love yourself over others? Idolatry called for frequent and generous outward sacrifices yet did not demand a true love for God or neighbor. It was not tied to covenantal obligations, as is clear in the way many in Judah remained prayerless, oppressed the weak, failed to heed God’s word, and lived in self-reliance (Zeph 1:6; 3:1–2). It was the easy way, but it led to destruction (Matt 7:13–14). Zephaniah would call his listeners to seek Yahweh in righteousness and humility and to wait upon the only true God to act (Zeph 2:3; 3:8). Christ modeled a life of service and sacrifice to others (Matt 20:28; Phil 2:8) and urged radical love for God and neighbor (Matt 22:37–40) that requires self-denial and service (16:24; 20:26–27) and persevering surrender to God and his ways (Josh 24:15; 1 Kgs 18:21; 1 Cor 10:31). Jesus’s followers must “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). This kind of lifestyle is not just hard; it is impossible (Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14), apart from the gracious work of God through Christ by his Spirit (Matt 19:26; Phil 2:12–13).<sup>7</sup>
4. *Convenient*. Do you ever find that following God gets in the way of your own agenda? While frequent and generous offerings were expected, such “worship” of idols could be performed whenever and wherever one so chose—“on every hill and under every green tree” (1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 17:10). But true worship of Yahweh demanded that Israel value Yahweh over self, regardless of the cost. They were to destroy pagan shrines and gather three times annually for community worship at his central sanctuary (Deut 12:2–14; cf. 16:16). They were to aid rather than ignore a neighbor suffering loss or an accident (22:1–4), and they needed to ensure that they abided by the other detailed prescriptions of the sacred calendar and covenant instructions. They were not their own; they had been bought with a price (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Today, holy, pleasing, and acceptable worship is found when we continually present ourselves spiritually as living sacrifices, proclaiming God’s excellencies, abstaining from fleshly passions, living honorably, doing good, and sharing what we have (Rom 12:1; Heb 13:15–16; 1 Pet 2:5, 9, 11–12). At times, this requires great cost through toil and hardship for the good others (Luke 14:26–28; 2 Cor 12:10), and this God-dependent and God-exalting lifestyle is not always convenient. Nevertheless, it is right, good, and necessary and the only path to life (Matt 16:24–25).
5. *Normal*. Are you ever prone to follow the crowd and give in to peer pressure, even when you know the majority is wrong? Idolatry was *the* normal way of life in the ancient world and stood in direct contrast to the counter-cultural biblical view there was a single God over all, who redeemed a people for relationship (Deut 4:32–40). Three features characterized most ancient idolatry: (1) *polytheism* (many gods) (2 Kgs 17:16; Zeph 1:4);

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Rom 4:2; Eph 2:9; Jas 4:16.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ezek 36:26–27; 1 Cor 15:10; Col 1:28–29.

(2) *syncretism* (blending worldviews) (2 Kgs 17:33; Zeph 1:5); (3) *pantheism* (God and the universe are one) (Jer 8:2; Zeph 1:5). Yet what the culture declares as normal is often not right, for “*many* walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil 3:18; cf. Matt 7:13–14) and most people are spiritually dead, following the devil and unable to accept God’s ways (Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:1–3). Contrary to *polytheism*, Christians must affirm in word and deed “‘that an idol is nothing in the world,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’”—indeed, “one God, the Father, . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 8:4, 6; cf. Deut 32:39; Isa 45:21–22). Against *syncretism*, “no one can serve two masters” (Matt 6:24). One is either free from condemnation and empowered by God’s Spirit to obey as a child of God or he is condemned and living according to the flesh as a child of the devil (John 3:18; Rom 8:13; 1 John 3:10). Finally, in contrast to *pantheism*, Yahweh God is eternally and wholly distinct from his creation yet sovereign over it (Gen 1:1; Isa 45:7; Heb 1:3; Acts 17:24–28), and humans uniquely bear the capacity and calling to display God’s glory as those made in his image (Gen 1:26–28; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10).

6. *Logical*. When you are sick, would you rather see a specialist or a general practitioner? Ancient peoples believed that most gods of the nations specialized in aspects of the world or nature.<sup>8</sup> For example, Baal of Canaan was the young weather god (Judg 2:11, 13); Ashtoreth his consort, the mother goddess of love and fertility (2:13); Chemosh of Moab, the god of war (11:24); and Dagon of Philistia, the god of grain (16:23). Other gods controlled life, death, light, evil, water, etc. Such specialization made it logical for people to seek “expert” help rather than go to Yahweh, who had to manage all spheres of life. In our day, you may find it easier to act without prayer, to look to “the experts” over God’s Word, or to follow the culture’s priorities and scheduling patterns instead of God’s values and instructions. Yet Yahweh alone sits on the throne of the universe (Deut 4:35, 39; 32:39), and he called his people to let this truth inform all their lives (5:7; 6:4–5). From him, through him, and to him are *all* things (Rom 11:36; cf. Eph 1:11). While knowing God’s eternal power and divine nature, humans quickly suppress the truth, dishonoring God, not giving him thanks, and even approving of others who turn from him (Rom 1:18–21, 32). Exchanging the glory of God for idols (1:23), they are darkened (Eph 4:17–18) and “stupid,” becoming “worthless” like what they worship (Jer 10:14–15; cf. 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; Ps 115:8). “This world’s wisdom is folly with God” (1 Cor 3:19), promoting “confusion and every base practice,” whereas God’s wisdom “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, sincere” (Jas 3:16–17).
7. *Sensuous*. How often are you ever tempted to turn away from God to satisfy ungodly desires? Sexual immorality and impurity of all sorts abounds all around us, and to embrace such practices in any way is to engage in idolatry. Focused on what is earthly, idolatry gratifies the physical senses and fleshly desires. In Scripture, it included bowing down and kissing idols (1 Kgs 19:18), visual (often pornographic) images and smells (Ezek 8:10–12), cutting the body, loud cries, and weeping (1 Kgs 18:28; Ezek 8:14),

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<sup>8</sup> They also distinguished personal, family, and national gods, the latter of whom bore limited geographical sovereignty (see 1 Kgs 20:23, 28; 2 Kgs 5:15, 17; Jon 1:3). While all Israelites would have affirmed Yahweh as their national god (because he created the nation and redeemed them from Egypt), many did not hesitate to pay homage to other deities in family or personal worship. Zephaniah, thus, pointed to those who “swear *to* Yahweh but swear *by* their king [e.g., Baal]” (Zeph 1:5).

heavy feasting and drunkenness (Amos 2:8; Acts 15:20–21; 21:25; 1 Cor 8:4–13); and immoral sex (see the close association in Acts 15:20; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5). Some even thought engaging in temple prostitution would obligate the gods to generate fertility on earth (e.g., Amos 2:7–8; Mic 1:7). Yet in Zephaniah’s day, King Josiah destroyed the houses of “the male cult prostitutes who were in Yahweh’s house [i.e., the temple]” (2 Kgs 23:7).<sup>9</sup> Such was the proper response, since Moses forbade cult prostitution (Deut 23:17) and Yahweh declares such idolatrous acts “abominations” against which he “will act in wrath” (Ezek 8:17–18). Similarly, Paul stressed that those who live “in the passions of the flesh” are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3; cf. 1 John 3:16). However, God’s saving grace trains believers so that, “having denied ungodliness and worldly passions, we may live sensibly and righteously and godly in the present age” (Tit 2:12). We must, therefore, “make no provision for the flesh” (Rom 13:14), while still celebrating God’s good gifts in their proper context and measure (1 Tim 4:4–5). Ever remember that “neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men practicing homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor abusers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9–10). Then revel in the fact that, though “such were some of you,” “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:11).

### **Conclusion: Flee Idolatry!**

John urged his fellow believers, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21), and he also warned that idolaters will end up “in the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev 21:8). Idolatry will result in ruin. Zephaniah opens his oracle warning against such evil, urging his listeners to embrace Yahweh’s supremacy over all things and to seek and inquire of him (Zeph 1:4–6). May we be among the remnant who heeds his voice.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 14:24; Job 36:14; Jer 5:7; Ezek 23.