

Shrinking To the Size of Our Idols

Isaiah 44

Introduction

A. By way of introduction God has been comforting his people. He has been encouraging Israel that they are precious in his eyes. He wants to assure them that there is a future for them, even though they will go through a horrible exile in which they will lose their homes and become slaves in Babylon.

But the real reason that all these horrible things will happen to them is quite simple. Instead of fearing the Lord and trusting in him, Judah refused to break itself from serving other gods. In Isaiah 44, God sends his prophet to confront Israel straight-up about their idolatry.

Now God begins this prophecy in verses 1-5 with a word of hope that his people will one day be totally different than what they presently are. Because God is God he is able to look into the distant future and speak of such a day. There will be a revival in which his people will not follow after false gods but will see themselves as “belonging to the Lord” and they will worship and serve him alone.

B. God's opening statement about himself

After assuring his people of what is ultimately to come, the Lord turns to the present situation and Judah's current worship of other gods. And he continues to speak to them as though he is still in court with his people (which began in chapter 41). The Lord presents his opening statement in verses 6-8. As a way of introduction to the chapter let's read these verses. Read 6-8.

These words are God's declaration to us and to the world that he alone is only one, true God. He is the King who reigns, our Redeemer, who is also Lord of a great multitude, the Lord of hosts. He had no beginning, therefore, he is the first. Because he alone is God he also remains supreme even beyond history so he is also the last. He reminds Israel, because he is God he had the power to tell them what would happen and Israel is his witness that he accomplished what he predicted he would do. No one else is able to do this because no one else is God. What is the conclusion? There is no God besides Yahweh, and there is no Rock who can be trusted like him.

So God opens with a definitive statement about himself. Then, God moves into his prosecution of Israel's idolatry, and what we find in verses 9-20 is a description of the true nature of idolatry and where it has left his people. Then in contrast in verses 21-28 God again speaks of who he truly is and what he will do for his people. And so we see this comparison: Here are your idols and what they have done for you and here I am and what I will do for you. Why would you not turn back to me and put your trust in me?

C. What is idolatry?

When we approach the subject of idolatry we, ourselves, continually struggle with various idols in our lives. Oh, we don't set up a little statue of Dagon and bow down to it, but we struggle with desires which take control of our heart and we want other things more than God. We give our love which rightfully belongs to God, our Redeemer, to something or someone else. If we put idolatry in the context of Isaiah we would also say that it is trusting some other god rather than trusting the LORD. For example, we trust in our anger as a means to get what we want, rather than walking patiently, trusting the work of God's hand.

The issue with each of these aspects of idolatry, whether we speak of what we want or love or trust or what desire controls our heart, we see that it is all about how we are directing our heart toward God. Everything has to do with God and whether or not we live in reverential awe of him, because he is

worthy of nothing less. So if we love or trust or have our hearts controlled by something other than God, then we are living in idolatry.

D. What God is seeking to do in Isaiah 44

So Isaiah 44 is an important prophecy for us and what God is seeking to do is to lead his people from their worship and trust of other gods. To do so, He reminds them of the absurdity of their idols and how these false gods continually leave them with nothing.

Now let's first look at the way the LORD addresses the false gods that Israel continued to worship and trust in. He develops two ideas in verses 9-20. He describes the total folly of these other gods and then the tragic end of those who trust in them. These two ideas are intermingled throughout this unit, the total folly of other gods and the tragic end of those who trust in them. So let's read verses 9-20.

1. The "gods" of Man's Rebellion vv 9-20

A. The total folly of idolatry

1) A false god is no more than the creation of man v 11

First, we see the total folly of idolatry. Verse 11 tells us, "the craftsmen are only human." Well, that is pretty telling. Unlike the true God who had no beginning and had no creator, the creator of these gods is nothing more than ...a man. Not a truer statement could be said-Man is always the creator of other gods.

God seems to mock this fact in verse 12 where he says, "The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm." One can almost feel the power being demonstrated in the creation of this god. Then God mocks, "He becomes hungry and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint." The hard working creator-man is...weak and he faints.

2) A false god is no more than the figure and beauty of man v 13

Not only do we see the folly of idols in the fact that man is the creator, but we also see it in the fact that even with the strongest, most creative man, the god he creates, according to verse 13, is nothing more than the figure and beauty of man.

Now someone might say, "Well, that's not bad. Isn't man the highest visible form of creation here on earth?" Yes, God made him that way, but the reality is our greatest glory is very small when compared to some of the other objects of creation. This is why the psalmist says in Psalm 8:3-4, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him."

Even as the highest being on earth, this is our humble place. We are very small compared to the creation out there, with its 100 billion galaxies with their 100 billion stars each.

3) The great absurdity of other gods vv 14-17

But the greatest absurdity is brought into focus in verses 14-17. A man grows a cedar among the other trees of the forest and once it matures he cuts it down. Most of the tree he uses for fire wood to cook his food and to keep himself warm, but out of the same tree he makes a god and worships it and puts his trust in it and prays, "Deliver me, for you are my god."

What is so absolutely absurd about this? He is blind to the fact that the very object that was intended to serve him becomes the object he serves and worships and calls his god. It's taking the common and absurdly elevating it so that it becomes the object of worship and trust.

How absurd is it when our organization takes on a life of its own and begins to create all kinds of fears in us when we face a little chaos? How absurd is it that we want our own way so badly that we hurt the people we love to get it? How absurd is it that we trust lying rather than speaking the truth? There are many directions our idols can take us, and they all lead us into absurdity.

This past week I was determined to finish a project in which I was putting a Formica top on a table base. And my son was out visiting his sister in Seattle. So I recruited my wife to carry this table top up our porch steps so I could put it on the table base in the house. As a good helper, my wife was very willing to try.

It turned out not to be a good idea. We got up four steps on the stairs, with two to go and my wife all of a sudden had no energy to take it the rest of the way. And so, there we were half way up the steps. And I started laughing when she tried to pick up the top and put it on the next step and couldn't even budge it. I thought to myself, "Surely there is no one so weak that they cannot pick up this top and put it on the next step." My wife was kind in receiving my laughter well. She started laughing, which did not help at all in getting the top up the steps. So there we were, holding this top in the middle of the steps not being able to move it.

Now instead of loving my wife, what controlled my heart was getting this project done. And instead of saying, "Honey, let's just slide the top back down to the ground and I will wait until Josiah gets home," I said, "Hon, you can do it. Just take it one more step." I kept encouraging her that she could do it. And she did... but afterwards I realized how absurd I was in my desire to get this project done as opposed to truly caring for my wife. Even good desires if they control our heart can become idols.

Our idols are absurd, but the real tragedy concerning our idols is the life that they lead us into. This is the other point the Lord makes here--The tragic end of those who trust in false gods. When we are foolish enough to take what was intended to serve us and instead we begin to serve it, our idols will leave us with nothing.

B. The tragic end of the one who trusts in false gods

1) He is reduced to nothing v 9

God tells us in verse 9 that "All who fashion idols are nothing." The word nothing is the same word used in Genesis 1:2 where we are told that the initial creation of the world was "without form." Like the idols in their hands those who create them are void, left with nothing.

2) What kind of "nothing" are we talking about here?

What kind of nothing are we talking about here? The Lord goes on to explain how we are left with nothing in three statements. One, our idols do not profit us (v 9). Two, our idols will leave us to live in fear and shame (vv 9, 11). And three, God tells us that our idols leave us totally blind so that we live in a delusion (vv 18-20). So our idols do not help us, they do not deliver us from our fears but actually lead us into shame, and they leave us trapped, believing things that simply are not true. It sounds pretty appealing doesn't it?

The next time you are tempted to turn to one of your idols, whether it is some secret sin or insisting on your own way, call to mind these three by-products, which in reality is what we end up having. It will not profit you, it will not deliver you from what you fear but it will leave you filled with shame, and finally, it will trap you in a delusion so that you believe something that simply is not true.

Our idols leave us with nothing, the Lord says.

2. The Eternal, Self-Existent God Whom We Are To Trust vv 21-28

A. The Supreme Majesty of the Living God vv 21-23

But in contrast, the Lord reminds Israel of who he truly is and because he is the only, true God, he explains what he is planning to do. He says in verse 21-28....Read.

1) The Lord is the one who formed and redeemed Israel

The Lord continues to remind Israel of two things: I am the one who formed you and I am the one who redeemed you, and because I am the one who brought you into existence and rescued you when you had no hope (when you were slaves in Egypt), I am not going to forget you. I am not going to stop being your God. Rather, I am going to work in such a way that one day you will glorify me.

2) We have been created and redeemed by God

There are two primary reasons why we worship God and trust in him alone. He is the one who created us. We would not have come into being apart from him ordaining our existence and forming us in the womb. And he is also the one who redeemed us from our sin, from certain hell, and has given us eternal life. This is why we call him, our God.

But as we go through this life it is easy for us to think that these things don't really matter to God, anymore. We feel the weight of daily life or an unexpected tragedy, and we think that God has moved on and forgotten us. The Lord says, "No, I have not forgotten you." How could I? I formed you and I went so far as to give the precious life of my Son to redeem you. How can I forget you now? This is the point in Romans 8:32-"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

Folks, God will never forget us. We are precious in his eyes. And because we are and because God is working all things for his glory, the Lord will be faithful.

And as God reminds Israel who he is he goes onto to tell them what he will do in verses 24-28.

B. The mighty deeds of the Lord vv 24-28

Because he is the LORD, the only true God, this is what he will do:

He will oppose the false prophets who seek to lead Israel to other gods, and he will fulfill all his words. He will rebuild Jerusalem and the cities of Judah after they have been destroyed. He will raise up Cyrus, the Persian king and like a shepherd, Cyrus will bring Israel back to the land as God promised and they will rebuild the Temple.

Do you see the battle that is going on here? Verse 25 tells us that the liars, which refer to the false prophets, will perform signs. Because we live in a supernatural world Satan will work to do miraculous signs, and in doing so, he will try to counterfeit the way God intended to substantiate that a prophet was speaking for Him. Do you remember that point last week?

Satan will try to cause confusion by working behind the scenes with supernatural works. God anticipated this so in Deut. 13:1-5 he teaches us that if we see a miraculous sign but the false prophet seeks to lead us to follow other gods, we shouldn't listen to him. It isn't enough to see a miracle. God's Word is the ultimate standard for what is true and false.

But here the Lord says, he will frustrate their signs and make fools of diviners and turn the knowledge of men who have worldly wisdom into foolishness. In other words, the Lord will not allow intruders to succeed who seek to invade His domain and steal his glory. He simply will not allow this. Rather, his word is what will stand. Specifically, he will rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple and he will do this through the edicts of a foreign king, named Cyrus.

God alluded to this king already (ch.41), but this is the first time he specifically names the deliverer, Cyrus. This prophecy was given 150 years before Cyrus appears on the scene, so it is remarkable. But the Lord predicted what would happen in the past and fulfilled his word, and he will continue to do so until all things are fulfilled.

This is who our God is.

Conclusion - The Secure End of the One Who Fears the LORD and Trusts in Him vv 1-5

Finally, in verses 1-5 God speaks of a better day, a day in which Israel will proclaim, "I am the Lord's." I belong to him. They will come to a place where they will finally believe the Lord is the only true God and they will honor him alone. What is noteworthy in these verses are the things the Lord will do when Israel finally turns to him and trusts in him. This is what God wants to be for us-our trust.

Unlike the false gods which left them with nothing, not helping them when they truly needed help, not being able to deliver them from their fears but leading them into a delusion of believing what simply is not true, God will lead them into a whole different life. Notice especially as we read verses 1-5 what God will do for his people. Read verses 1-5.

We see in these verses what the Lord will do for his people when we honor him and put our trust in him. He says, we will have nothing to fear, because he will be our help. When the heat of trials parch our life, he will pour out water and we will become like a tree planted by a stream.

Folks, when we recognize that the Lord has redeemed us and bought us with a price, we will say, I belong to the Lord, and as we believe his ownership in our lives, we will live in the security of knowing him and being his.

Here's the issue: Will we walk in faith or unbelief? Will we believe the word of God which God has proven again and again, or will we believe the empty promises of our idols?

And here's a real battle. Life feels so good when I serve my idols. I feel secure when I am in control. Life seems to go better, at least for the moment, when I use anger to get my kids to do what I want. I can cover my tracks when I lie to my boss and get myself off the hook. It's so much easier to live a lazy life and not make myself do the hard things. And it is easy to believe that a little sin won't hurt me.

These are some of the idols that tempt us, and they seem to promise so much. But when we believe their lies, we fail to recognize in those moments that God is still the King who rules, and he will not share his glory with anyone else. Essentially, our idols in the eyes of God are the things that we desire more than him, the things we love more than him, or the things we trust rather than him. Therefore, he will oppose our idols.

But in his mercy, he invites us to turn from our idols, and he says, "I have so much more to offer you." If you let go of the control of your world and give it to me, then I can deal with your problems and I will be your help. If you learn mercy from me you will learn how to speak the truth in love, and you will also see that the biggest problem is not the idols of your kids, but the idols of your own heart, and you will attract them with humility and grace. If you honor me with your obedience, you will discover that holiness is far more satisfying than sin. And in all of this, you will discover the security of fearing the Lord and trusting in Him, and you will not be afraid.