

## THE ADVANTAGE OF IDOLS

Scriptures: Isaiah 44:9-20; 46:1-7

I have a book of children's songs about the Ten Commandments called *Sir Oliver's Song*. It was the kind of thing to which my children listened before the days of Veggie Tales. The song on the second commandment, "You shall not make for yourselves a graven image," goes like this:

Some people chop up cedar wood, then do strange things I've never understood.  
With half of the wood they cook their food, and with half they make a god.  
How can you worship cedar wood? How could it ever possibly be good?  
If the tree could think it would have found a way you couldn't chop it down.

Do you see the similarity to our first scripture lesson? In Isaiah 44, Isaiah talks about a man who cuts down a cedar tree, and in verses 16-17 Isaiah says,

Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!" The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Save me, for you are my god!"

In verse 19 Isaiah says,

No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"

"If a tree could think it would have found a way you couldn't chop it down."

Of course, no one in the ancient world believed that a block of wood was actually a god. Ancient people were smarter than that. They believed that the block of wood represented a god. They believed that when they fell down and worshiped before a statue, they were showing devotion to the god represented by the statue.

But why have a statue at all? What is the advantage of an idol? Why would anyone want to worship a god made out of wood or stone, a god that you had to carry around with you?

The answer, if you think about it, is quite simple: When you make your own god, you end up with a god of your own liking. When you make your own god, you end up with a god that suits you. Think how convenient an idol is. Isaiah 44:13 says, "The carpenter stretches a line, marks it with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine." When you make your own god, you can make it to look like yourself.

Another advantage is that an idol, a statue of wood or stone, never talks back. It never confronts you about your attitude or behavior. Isaiah 46:7 says,

They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone from trouble.

Isaiah uses this as an argument against idols, but for many people this is an advantage. An idol can not nag you or make you feel guilty. That's why many people would rather have a gold fish than a spouse. An idol just sits there on your shelf reminding you of how clever you are as a human being. If you ever want to go somewhere, you just take the idol with you. You don't have to worry about the idol telling you where to go. An idol can not call you into some new form of service for Christ. An idol can not tell you to be reconciled with someone from whom you are alienated. An idol can not tell you to stop some self-destructive habit or to start a positive new discipline. An idol will leave you alone. Isn't that what many people want—to be left alone?

It is not only ancient people who make idols. Many people today create their own gods. They just do it more subtly.

A few weeks ago I picked up a book called *The Jefferson Bible*. I did not know this, but Thomas Jefferson created his own edited copy of the Bible. He did this by cutting out all passages of the Bible he liked and pasting them into a notebook. The result is called the Jefferson Bible. It turned out to be a fairly thin. He left out the entire Old Testament, because he did not think much of the Jews. Jefferson said of the Jews: "Their ideas of (God) and of (God's) attributes were degrading and injurious. Their ethics were not only imperfect, but often irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason and morality ..." So much for the Old Testament. But he also left out a great deal of the New Testament. He includes nothing at all about Jesus' virgin birth or any of the miracles Jesus did. Instead his entire Bible consists of Jesus' parables and sayings, passages like the Sermon on the Mount. He tells the story of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, but his Bible ends with these words: "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus: and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed." That's it. That is the end of Jefferson's Bible. In Jefferson's Bible Jesus comes off like a wise, rational, liberal-minded product of the Enlightenment—a kind of ancient Middle Eastern Thomas Jefferson. When you pick and choose your own Bible, you end up with something you like, something that is like you.

I once had a person visiting our church tell me, "I'm looking for a church where everyone thinks the way I do." How convenient: a church that never disagrees with you, a church that always goes along with you wherever you want to go, a church that never talks back to you, that never asks you to re-examine your life. Such a church would be an idol.

Paul Scheerer, a former professor of preaching at Princeton Seminary, once said, "Nothing is safe in the world with a living God around." There are certain advantages to idols. Idols are convenient, safe, and unobtrusive. There is something dangerous about a living God.

A living God talks. A living God may tell you things you don't want to hear—things you need to hear but don't want to hear. An idol is something you can carry around, something you can take wherever you want to go. Our second scripture reading from Isaiah 46 begins by talking about two Babylonian gods named Bel and Nebo whose statues were worshiped by the Babylonians. Verse 1 says, "Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are on beasts and cattle; these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary animals." An idol is a god you can carry around with you and take wherever you want to go. But a living God is someone who carries you. Listen again to Isaiah 46:3-4. The Lord says,

Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and save.

I am sure you have all heard or read that wonderful piece called "Footprints in the Sand." A person reflects back on the journey of his or her life and sees two pair of footprints in the sand. One belongs to God and one to the person. But suddenly after a crisis in the person's life, the second set of footprints disappears. The person asks God, "Why did you leave me?" God replies, "I did not leave you. I carried you." That story makes a great illustration for Isaiah 46 where God says, "Even when you turn gray I will carry you."

But what would happen if the two sets of footprints in the sand became one set of footprints, then suddenly veered off in some weird direction? That is usually what happens in the Bible. In Exodus 19:4 the Lord tells the people of Israel, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." The Lord carried the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. But do you know where God brought them? Into a wilderness with no food and water! Eventually God brought them to the promised land, but then God took them into exile. When God starts carrying you, you better watch out, because you never know where God will take you next.

Paul Scheerer is right. Nothing is safe in the world with a living God around. But that is the good news, because if the God we worship is simply an image of ourselves, if the God we worship is no wiser, stronger, or more compassionate than we are, then we are in a lot of trouble.

- Ken Onstot  
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