

Dealing with the idols of our heart

1. Intro

- Today we're going to be dealing with the topic of idolatry
- In today's world, when you speak of idolatry people think of ancient cultures, bowing down to statues
- And in the ancient world of the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Babylonians ... idol worship was everywhere
- When the Apostle Paul visited Athens in the 1st century he noticed there were idols and places of worship all over the city, include an altar to an 'unknown god'
 - Aphrodite > goddess of beauty
 - Ares > god of war
 - Artemis > goddess of fertility and wealth
- Our contemporary world is not that different
 - Each culture has its idols
 - Each has its 'priests' and totems
 - Each has its shrines
 - Office towers, shopping plazas, gymnasiums, sports arenas
 - Where people can go and
 - worship their idol and
 - offer sacrifices and
 - give money
 - hoping that it will give them the particular thing in life they need or are looking for
- We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many are driven to obsession over their body image and how beautiful / buff they look
- We may not burn incense to Artemis, but when money and wealth are idolised we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family to achieve a higher salary, promotion or achievement
- Today Ezekiel Ch 8 looks at the problem of idolatry
 - As we go we'll see that idolatry is not just about the things of this world that we bow down and worship ... but it's actually a problem of the heart
 - Not only is idolatry a great problem ... but it also has a great cost
- Hopefully by the end ... we'll see God gives us the means to deal with our idolatry

- Today looking at
 - Crime of our idolatry
 - Cost of our idolatry
 - Cessation of our idolatry

2. Context

- We are in a section of Old Testament history where God's people have been deported
- It's called the exile > it took place in 597BC
- The people of God had distanced themselves mentally from God
- And so God decided that He would distance Himself physically from them
- And He chose a kind of a bulldozer called Babylon
 - And the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar came in and scooped up 10,000 Israelites from the city of Jerusalem and took them east to Babylon
 - And within the next 10 years ... although the Israelites didn't realise, the Babylonians were going to move in and destroy the city
- Amongst the exiles was a young man Ezekiel whom God was using to be his mouth piece to the exiles in Babylon and bring his word to them
- He's foretold the exiles that God is not going to rescue Jerusalem from the Babylonians ... but that
 - Jerusalem is going to be besieged
 - Many would die due to famine and plague
 - Many more would die by the sword when the city fell to the Babylonians
 - Rest would be scattered among the nations as they fled
- This was a shocking message for Ezekiel and the exiles to hear about their land, their city, their homes
 - But even more shocking was that this was God's people, God's city, God's Temple ... and it was going to fall
- Naturally the exiles would have been wondering "Why?"
 - In these chapters God gives Ezekiel a clear vision to take to the exiles to explain why this will happen
- And it's all because of their idolatry

3. The crime of our idolatry

- Chapter begins with a new vision for Ezekiel

- 14mths since his first vision when he saw the magnificent vision of God in all his splendour and majesty on his mobile throne ruling over all people, nations and creation
- Now God gives him a new vision > this time it's a vision of what is happening back in Jerusalem
- And it's as though God has picked Ezekiel up and transported him back to Judah to give him an insider's perspective to see it all for himself

- And God gives him four insights into the idolatry that had become endemic amongst God's people in Jerusalem
- Need to remember this is a visionary experience and not a video documentary
 - But it's indicative of what is going on in Jerusalem ... all it equally offensive to God
- So what does he see?

- ***Idol of Jealousy (v5-6)***
- First he sees the idol of jealousy
 - Not clear what the idol is > probably a statue of Asherah or Astarte – Canaanite goddess¹
 - Somehow, someone has set this thing up in the Temple
 - This is like a husband bringing home his new girlfriend saying
 - "Honey, I would like you to meet so and so... she's my new lover"

- For that reason it's called a statue of jealousy because it provokes God's jealousy for his people
 - Like the wife is rightly jealous for her husband's affections for her and no one else
 - So God's jealousy for his people is aroused because of this statue

- ***Idol worship of 70 elders (7-13)***
- Ezekiel is taken further inside the Temple and he sees images of '*crawling things and detestable animals all over the walls*'
 - These crawling animals are probably Egyptian gods > crocodiles, snakes, beetles
 - Sees lots of idols > lots of little alcoves > side chapels for worship
 - Sees 70 elders each worshipping these idols

¹ Such a statue was erected during the reign of Manessah (2 Kings 21:7) about 80 years before hand. Removed during reforms of Josiah > something similar installed in more recent times

- These guys are the spiritual leaders of Israel ... and yet here they are gathering in little alcoves, in front of different shrines ... bowing down and worshipping these Egyptians gods
- And their logic for doing this in v12 is "*The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.*"
 - In other words, they think God has abandoned them and is no longer watching over them so they take it upon themselves to find other gods that will

- ***Idol worshipping women (14-15)***
- Then the Lord shows Ezekiel another scene
- This time it's a group of women worshipping Tammuz
 - Tammuz was a Babylonian² god that had developed a cult of mourning
 - So here Ezekiel sees these Israelite women caught up in false worship as part of this foreign cult

- ***Idol worshipping men (v16)***
- Then the Lord takes Ezekiel right into the heart of the Temple ... there he sees a group men this time, worshipping the sun
 - Their worship could not be more offensive to God if they tried
 - Not only are they worshipping one of the most powerful gods of Babylon
 - But with the Temple behind them, they have literally turned their backs on God right in front of his face
 - And as they are bowing down to the sun it's as though they are raising their backsides to God ... the one who made the sun
- It is a blatant rejection of God

- **Implications**
- What Ezekiel is seeing here is complete and utter spiritual and political anarchy
 - Not only are the people full engrossed in idol worship
 - But they are doing it IN THE TEMPLE ... in the house of God
 - It's a complete slap in the face to God
- And God's assessment of what is going is it's utterly detestable
 - And it is!
 - It would be like turning you family home into a brothel

- Even more concerning is the underlying reason behind their worship

² Sumerian,

- It seems that in worshipping the gods of Canaan, Egypt and Babylon, the Israelites are calling on the gods of nations to come to their rescue in their time of need

- You see, the people have given up on God
 - They think he is powerless to rescue them
 - So they are looking to other idols to save them

- **Application**
- Now friends this may seem far away from you and from our modern, sophisticated, highly intelligent, developing world
 - You may be thinking ... all this idolatry of the Israelites is just part of an ancient civilization that's primitive and naïve and not really relevant to me and my world

- But the reality is ... we are just as idolatrous today as the Israelites were 600BC
 - It's just we have different idols

- You see an idol is something other than God that's more fundamental to your happiness, meaning in life and identity
 - Idolatry is not so much wanting bad things ... its taking good thing and turning them into the ultimate things
- This means that anything can be an idol including good things like
 - Family, career, achievement, independence, social or political cause, a person or a relationship, material possessions, romance, physical attractiveness, financial security, human approval etc

- An idol is anything that you or I trust more than God
 - Anything that we look to as our functional saviour
 - That is ... we look to that person or thing to give us happiness, meaning and identity in life

- The Israelites were looking to foreign gods and idols to save them and give them what they wanted
- And that's what we do with our idols
 - We look to them to give us what our hearts desire > what we truly love

- John Calvin (great Protestant Reformer) said – "The heart is an idol making factory"

- Jesus likewise says it's the heart that is the source of our idolatry
 - *Mark 7:20 - What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.'*
- And it's so often our hearts desires ... the things that we love most ... that we turn into idols
- Thomas Cranmer³ once said
 - *"What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies."*
 - That is, the thing your heart desires > the thing you want most ... you will chose to go after it and you will explain and rationalise your choice to suit
 - *"What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies."*
 - Therefore the thing our hearts love will drive and determine our behaviour in life
- Example
 - A persons heart's desire might be the approval and affirmation from others
 - They might seek to satisfy that desire in their body image > fit, muscles, looking beautiful, being skinny > people noticing and telling them
 - They rationalise it by saying > "just being fit, just looking after myself"
 - In reality they're feeding their idol for approval and body image
- And so the human heart ... even the converted human heart ... is capable of taking good things that God gives us and making it the ultimate thing
 - And as a result we will live and operate to fulfill that heart's desire ... even if it means behaving in ways that are irrational or hurtful to ourselves and others
- The thing is ... like the Israelites in Jerusalem there are many idols that our hearts set their affections on
 - Some are 'near' idols ... things that are more obvious and discernible
 - Family, career, achievement, independence, social or political cause, a person or a relationship, material possessions, romance, physical attractiveness, financial security, human approval etc
 - But often underlying those near idols are what Tim Keller calls 'far idols'
 - That is ... they are deep desires of the heart that we turn to, to give us happiness, meaning and identity in life

³ Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I. Died 1556

- Keller suggests there are four 'far' idols that dominate our hearts affections
 - Control
 - Comfort
 - Power
 - Approval
- Complicated thing is ... the same 'near' idols might be used to satisfy a different 'far' idol
 - Desire for constant sexual relationships (near idol) could be satisfying a heart desire
 - For power > as the person sees each encounter as sexual conquest
 - For approval > as the person sees each encounter as affirming their value as a person
- A persons constant anxiety and fretting about kids, job, money etc ... driven by their desire for control
- A persons anger at being contradicted in front of children or peers at work will often be due to their desire for power
- So you see, deep down, the human heart is idolatrous as it desires people or things around us more than God
- ***Identifying your idols***
- You may not be bowing down and worshipping your idol like the Israelites ... but like them ... it's often our external behaviour that's going to be the clue to the deeper idol of the heart
- A way to do that is ask yourself questions like ...
 - What do you look for in life to make you really happy?
 - What would really make you feel accepted?
 - What would make life meaningful?
 - What makes you excessively angry?
 - What are you most fearful of?
 - What do you worry about most?
 - What is it, that if you lost it, would make life unbearable?
 - What prayer unanswered would make me seriously think about turning away from God?
 - What gives me my self-worth?
- When you start answering those questions with yourself honestly ...
 - Then you will undoubtedly find that Calvin was right ...
 - The heart **is** an idol factory ...

- And we have any number of heart desires that are pushing God to the periphery and competing for our affections

4. The Cost of our Idolatry – Death and Departure

- In chapter 8 Ezekiel sees the crime of idolatry
- In chapter 9 he sees the cost of idolatry
- **Death**
- And in Ezekiel 9 the Lord plans to do two things
- And in 9:4, he asks a man to go through the city and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over the detestable things that are done in the city
 - And so this man is given the job of going out and putting a mark on the faithful
 - That is ... those who have some sense that God is true and evil is false
 - And so some are marked and protected > presumably to be spared judgment that is about to come
- And then the Lord calls six guards of the city ... and they have the terrible task of taking their swords ... and going through the city and striking down those who are being unfaithful
 - He will not have pity or spare them
 - And although the people shout in God's ears (through fervent prayers) he will not listen to them
- It's a terrible section
- Now remember this is a vision
 - It's not a film
 - It's a mental picture of what God will do with idolatry
 - Reality is ... it was the Babylonians who besieged and conquered the city
 - No doubt when they did there was great bloodshed
- We may think, of course, that God is over-reacting
 - But if we think that ... that may show actually how far we have drifted from understanding the seriousness of idolatry to God
 - Like the adulterous spouse who is stunned when their wife or husband decides to leave > they've lost touch with reality and the seriousness of the issue
- We must be very careful that we don't invent for ourselves a sentimental God who is wrathless

- Because once you've invented a God who is wrathless ... nothing matters
- Jesus needn't have come ... justice doesn't matter ... chaos will reign
- Now that's the first cost of idolatry – death
- **Departure**
- The second cost of idolatry is departure
- If we were to read the entire section of this part of Ezekiel which is Ch 8-11 ... we'd see the whole section is connected by the image of glory of the Lord slowly departing the Temple
- The glory of the Lord ... is God's visible presence among his people in Jerusalem and in particular in the Temple
 - Go back 400 years to the time of King Solomon who built the Temple
 - And when the Temple was completed and dedicated ...
 - *1 Kings 8:10-11* When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. ¹¹ And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.
- But now because of the people's idolatry ... Ezekiel is seeing the glory of the Lord slowly leaving the Temple
 - Starts in 9:3 - *'Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim,'*
 - That is above the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies > inner most room of the Temple
 - *Ezekiel 10:18* – *Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple.*
 - *Ezekiel 11:23* – *The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.*
- Do you see what is happening?
 - God is departing the city
 - He is leaving the temple
 - He said in 8:6 – there's an idol in the temple and it will drive far from my sanctuary ... and that's exactly what is happening
- So the cost of idolatry is death and departure.
 - The rebellious person dies and God departs from them

- **Application**

- Of course what started off as an odd story from ancient times that hardly seemed relevant to 21st century Sydney ... has now become very relevant hasn't it?
 - Because once we understand that by nature our hearts are idol factories
 - And now we see the seriousness with which God treats idolatry ... we are very much in need of a solution
- There's no rationalising our way out of it
 - There's no pretending it's not true
- There's idolatry in my life and there is idolatry in your life, and there is absolutely no way that God is going to look at the Israelites idolatry and say,
 - 'Well, they're idolatrous and they got death and departure, but you lot here in Sydney have been idolatrous – but forget it, it doesn't matter'.
 - It's not going to happen!
- As idolaters ... we too deserve to face death and departure

5. Cessation of our idolatry

- Is there a way out of our idolatry and therefore a way to avoid the death and departure we deserve
- Yes there is ... and it starts with repentance
 - We see in 9:4 it's those grieve and lament their idolatry who are spared death and departure
 - Repentance literally means to change one's mind > to turn around
 - Starting point has got to be recognising our idolatry and repenting of it
- But it's not simply a matter of identifying your idol and trying to get rid of it
 - We can try and bend our wills and convince ourselves of the need to do this and do that and try harder
 - Or we can appeal to our emotions by looking at inspiring examples of those who have succeeded and crushed their idols and living for Jesus
- But in the end ... neither of those things will bring any lasting change
 - Because as Cranmer says ... *"What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies."*
 - Bending the will and appealing to the emotions won't bring about lasting heart change

- And because it's the heart that loves and desires ... it's the heart that needs to be changed if we're going let go of our idols
- The only way you and I can get rid of the idols of our hearts is to give our hearts something bigger > something more desirable > something greater to love than the idols of our hearts
 - The only thing that can do that is Jesus
 - If you uproot the idol and fail to 'plant' Jesus in its place, either
 - The old idols will grow back
 - You'll replace our old idol with something else to desire
- **Illustration – Tim Keller story**
- Tim Keller tells a story of a lady in his church who had a deep need for male affection that meant she was happy to get it from virtually any man who offered it
 - As a result she got into many abusive relationships
 - After a while she started coming to Keller's church and became a Christian and started seeing a counsellor
 - She said her counsellor helped her identify her need for acceptance and identity was dependence on her relationships with men > which was really helpful
 - But her counsellor then suggested she go and get a good career > get an education, have a successful career and then you'll feel good about yourself
- And the woman wisely realised, that what her counsellor was asking her to do was swap one near idol for another to satisfy her far idol of identity and approval
 - She knew there was only one way to get rid of her idol ... and that's to find her identity and approval in Christ
- Jesus Christ and the good news of his death and resurrection is the thing that needs be the defining affection of our heart
 - Only Jesus and the gospel will bring a cessation of our idolatry
 - Only as we see how Jesus truly satisfies our hearts desires ... will we be willing to truly repent and let go of our idols ... as we see that in Christ we truly have something greater
- And the greatest thing of course about Jesus is that at the cross he endured death and departure himself
 - Death on the cross

- Departure of the Father as he cried out "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"
- And why did he do it?
 - So that idolaters like you and I, who put our trust in Him, might be spared death and departure we deserve for worshiping the idols of our heart

6. Conclusion

- See the crime of our idolatry
- See the cost of our idolatry
- See that the only way our hearts will cease to be idol factories ... is to
 - see our idolatry for what it is and repent of that
 - see afresh the beauty of Jesus who is infinitely greater than the idols of our heart
- May He become the one thing our hearts truly desire as we rejoice in his death and departure for us

PRAY

Read more about idols our hearts recommend Tim Keller's book – *Counterfeit Gods: when the empty promises of love, money and power let you down*