

Whom Shall we Trust?

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[0 : 00] Now, I wonder what you think of when I mention the word idol. If you've just come from Asia or Africa, then perhaps you might have these sort of things on the slide in mind.

Carved statues made of wood, stone, gold or silver. However, if you've lived in Australia for a while, then you may be thinking of this instead, Australian Idol.

The search for Australia's Knicks big pop star. Or you might be thinking of sporting idols, top tennis players like Djokovic, or maybe Gary Ablett Jr., for those of you who follow AFL.

Or perhaps movie idols like Angelina Jolie. Now, these stars come from different walks of life and they may not be your particular idol. But you can't argue with their popularity, can you?

And the reason they're popular is because idols, these sort of idols, capture what people want to be like. If only they had their talent and their luck. They capture the ideals of a society, how people wished they would live, what they value in society, their view of success, and what it means to lead a good life.

[1 : 19] So as a society, we worship these people in inverted commas. Not the specific individuals themselves necessarily, but what they represent. It sells magazines, right?

Put William and Kate on the magazine and it sells. And when we turn on the TV and watch the chat shows or the ads, what is being marketed at us are their stories.

Their ideals, they reflect the ideals and values of what success and the good life is all about and how to go about getting it ourselves. So if you watch any talent competition, whether it's Australian Idol or MasterChef or even The Biggest Loser, it's never just about the singing or the cooking or the losing of the weight, is it?

They always have the backstory of the individuals because they want to inspire us to follow their dreams. So we find out about Guy Sebastian, the first Australian idol, his upbringing in Adelaide, how he was a lead vocal for his church and then he sang for Planet Shakers.

And then suddenly, even every humble band member, particularly those in the front row tonight, will be inspired to be like him too. They dream that they will go mainstream one day and use their fame to be a witness for God.

[2 : 46] Of course, Guy has moved on to bigger and better things. And we may not realize all this, but this is the sort of messaging that goes on all the time, isn't it? From the media, to our work, to school, every time we step into the world, there's a big battle going on to capture our hearts and minds, to shape our dreams and our hopes, to shape what we think happiness is all about and how we are to attain it.

And I guess when we look at today's psalm, we find that things have always been thus. There's not been any change. Look at the first two verses. Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory because of your love and faithfulness.

But why are they asking this? Well, why do the nations say, where is their God? The people of Israel knew what the reality was. They knew that God exists, that he saved them, he's loved them and he's faithful them.

But they also want the nations to hear of God's honor and fame. Because the nations have an alternate vision, don't they? They have their own views of what is power and what is fame.

And they can't see Israel's God in action. And so they taught them, asking, where is your God? That is, how can you worship a God you cannot see?

[4 : 06] Look at our success. If your God exists, then where is your success? Why would he allow you to be defeated by Babylon and be deported into exile?

Now, of course, Israel knew better. They knew that the reason that all this happened was because of their own rebellion, not because God failed to bless them. In fact, the fact that they returned is

actually a sign of God's love and faithfulness.

But the nations around, they can't see any of this. Because what Israel sees is seen through the eyes of faith. And I suppose it's not very different for us, is it? How often do we wish that God would allow himself to be more clear in this life, in this world?

If only he would show himself more clearly to our friends and family. Then they wouldn't say things like, if your God is real, why would he allow you to suffer? They wouldn't say, if he is real, then what success in life do you have to show for it?

Now, our friends or family may not say that aloud, but those are the sort of questions that they have in their minds. In fact, John Dixon has written a book about this.

[5 : 12] And I've got the cover page on the next slide. And the title of it is, If I Were God, I'll Make Myself Clearer. And this task of making God clear is even harder when we have all these counterclaims to compete with in this world.

Whether it's the success of our colleagues or our classmates, and not just their success, but their resulting prosperity and popularity, we may even, I guess, be tempted ourselves.

Maybe not to follow them fully, but, well, let's have an each-way bet, just in case. Well, how does the psalm respond to questions like these?

By essentially turning the tables on those questions. You see, they may taunt us about a God we cannot see, but their gods can't see themselves, or speak, or act.

But first, there is also an answer to the question of God's presence. So verse 3. Where is the God of Israel? Well, our God is in heaven.

[6 : 21] He does whatever He pleases. Now, this is not saying that God is aloof or uncaring, like when mom tells you dad is in his studies, please don't disturb him.

No. He's merely stating, telling us who God is. The phrase, He's in heaven, simply means that He doesn't belong in creation. That He's the creator, and therefore He can do whatever He pleases.

And we, as His creatures, we can't tell Him what to do or not to do. He's not at our back and core.

He's in heaven. He's in control. He does whatever He pleases. It doesn't mean that He's unmoved by our cries for help.

No. No. But God will act in His own way, according to His own wisdom and purpose in this world. He doesn't do stuff just because we demand it of Him.

On the other hand, verse 4, what about the gods which the nations worship? Well, they're simply gods that cannot see or speak or act. Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands.

[7 : 27] They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see, they have ears but cannot hear, noses but they cannot smell, they have hands but they cannot feel, feet but cannot walk, nor can they utter a psalm with their throats.

Those who make them will be like them, and so will all those who trust in them. So they may well taunt Israel's God because they cannot see Him, but their gods, well, they can see them all right, but they're dumb, you know.

They're just sitting there unresponsive. And they're a product of their own creation. Now, we may sort of sit here, we may laugh at people who, you know, how can they, you know, they're primitive, how can they ever worship blocks of wood or even gold or silver?

I mean, surely they would know better. But I guess we mustn't be too quick to judge them because at heart, all humans are created to be worshippers.

And so in the absence of a true God, someone they can truly worship, what people do is they find and make their own gods. Now, that's what the Apostle Paul discovered in Athens, didn't he? We read in Acts today that they even built an altar to an unknown God.

[8 : 37] That's how desperate they are to want to worship something, that they will build an altar to someone that they don't even know. John Calvin said that the human heart is a perpetual idol factory.

We can't help it because we're created to live for something or someone greater than ourselves. Maybe it's even just a purpose or an ideal, something that will give meaning to our lives, that will give us satisfaction and fulfillment, identity and belonging.

That's what idols do for them. But notice the psalm describes how absurd those idols are. Because when we make our own God, they end up being like us.

We're limited by our own imagination. And what we create is a pale imitation of us. And then what happens is that over time, the idol captivates the idol maker so that we become like our idols.

God created us to be like him, but when we worship idols, we become like our idols. That is, we become blind, we are unable to speak the truth or act out in truth.

[9 : 53] We're dead. And what we do is we live out an illusion rather than live out the reality that God has made us to be. Those who make them will be like them and so will all who trust in them.

And so nowadays, we may be more sophisticated in the sense that we don't bow down to pieces of wood or stone, but our world is still filled with idols.

Only they're unseen. They're tucked away in our hearts. But everyone still worships something or someone. Someone or something they hope will bring them joy or fulfillment in life.

Last week, I think it was, I was at a bank, the bank, my bank, and they've now set up these banks with new branches where they have comfy sofas that you can sit and wait. You don't line up at the teller anymore.

It's just to make you sort of feel like you're waiting not as long as what you actually are. But anyway, that's beside the point. Because what happened when I was waiting was that two other ladies were seated in the sofa next to me and one of them started talking.

[11 : 05] She had come to the bank because she wanted to transfer some money to her son who was living in Cambridge. He was studying a Master's of Law over there. And she had invested, obviously invested a lot in the success of her son because she started telling her lady friend of her motivation.

She said things like, all my life, my son has had the very best. Every dollar I've earned, I've given it to him. He has had the best clothes, the best perfume.

You know, I wear shabby clothes. It doesn't matter. As long as he has the best, that's all I really want. Whatever he needs, I will give him the money for it. I may have done without in my life.

I know I've worked really hard. I haven't taken holidays. Every cent I've earned, I've given it to him. But I want him to get it because after he gets this Master's, then he'll have a very good life. He will be able to find a wife and she wouldn't need to work.

And then when I die, all the money I've got, it will go to him. And then she said, not a single cent would go to his father. So obviously, I think the marriage is broken down.

[12 : 16] But friends, do you see what she's done? She's actually made an idol out of her son, hasn't she? Everything that she's missed out in life was now being projected onto him.

But as I was sitting there, I actually feared for her future and his because she was turning her son into a version of herself. Either her expectations will crush him or he will actually turn out to be exactly as she hoped he would be, a success-driven workaholic who may provide for his family but not be around much to sustain a lasting or happy marriage.

Now, this woman's view may be extreme, but I actually recognize those dangers in myself. The children are meant to be God's gift to parents. But so often, we take what is good and we turn them into gods.

And the thing is that the greater the gift that God has given us, the more likely we turn them into idols. So you may have seen this yourself. If your parents were migrants in Australia or else you've seen it with your friends, you know, migrant parents, they come here, they do it tough, and so they invest all their dreams into their kids.

Private schools, private tuition, whatever it takes, right? So that it is drummed into their children's minds that the only way to success is to be, I don't know, the doctor or the lawyer that they never could be.

[13 : 42] Now, other families may not have this fixation with education, but it will be something else. Sport or the performing arts, maybe. Just look at the sport fields every weekend or the ballet schools.

They are awash with parents hoping that their child will be the next Don Bradman or the next big thing on Broadway. Whatever. I don't know. Now, any of these things bad necessarily?

No, they're not. But without a knowledge of the true God, then what happens is that they turn these good things into idols. They try to find in these things their meaning in life and their source of happiness.

And so the question for all of us is not so much do you worship a God or not, but rather which God are you worshipping? Which God are you entrusting your life to?

Now, how do we tell that something has become our God? When it becomes that immovable thing in our life, the thing you must have or else your life's not worth living, every other priority in your life

gets pushed aside in order to achieve this one thing.

[14:53] So, for example, if you can't imagine yourself not being a doctor or lawyer, then that has become your idol. If you think that unless you're married, you'll never be truly happy, then you've made marriage your idol.

Now, the possibilities are endless. I could keep going. I mean, trust me, even pastors like me can easily turn ministry into an idol. Whatever we do, whatever God has given to us, it's just so easy that we turn them into idols.

And I guess, if you think about it, there's actually no way of running away from it. It's not like, oh, we just go and hide in a cave and we wouldn't have any more idols. No, that's not how it works. The only way to get rid of idols in our life is to keep putting God at the center of our lives.

Put Him there so that nothing else can take that place. And so, we turn back to the psalm. In the words of the psalmist, he says, trust in the Lord.

Trust in the Lord because He's the only one who can truly bless us. So, beginning at verse 9, he says, all you Israelites, trust in the Lord. He is their help and shield. House of Aaron, trust in the Lord.

[16:04] He is their help and shield. You who fear Him, trust in the Lord. He is their help and shield. So, three times for emphasis. Trust in the Lord, for only He is their help and shield.

Now, this is written, I think, to be recited by the congregation. And this section, I think, is where the worship leader leads in that worship or in that psalm. And what he does is that he's sort of working his way through the congregation, isn't it?

So, first of all, all the Israelites are spoken to, then to the house of Israel because these are the leaders who will teach God's truth. And then finally, he makes it personal to everyone, speaking directly to each and everyone who fears the Lord.

But in each case, the command is still the same. Trust in the Lord. That is, make choices in life that show that we rely on Him. Show that we trust in Him.

Why? Because God is their help and shield. Only God can truly help them and give them whatever they need, the protection that they need in life. And that's the difference between God and the idols.

[17:06] He may not be seen, but He speaks, He sees, He hears, and He's able to act on all those things. Everyone or everything else we put our trust in will end up disappointing us.

If it's a person, we might even end up crushing our relationship with them because the expectations that we place on them would just be too great. Only God can truly bless us in the things we seek. It's not bad to have a desire for happiness or identity or fulfillment. But it is only in God, our Maker, that it can be fulfilled. And so in verse 12, the people now assure themselves of this by repeating the phrase that God will bless them.

So verse 12, The Lord remembers us and will bless us. He will bless His people Israel. He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord, small and great alike. So each one that was referred to and admonished to trust in the Lord is now given the assurance that they will be blessed.

Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord. And for Israel, they have this added assurance that God remembers, remembers them, but more importantly, remembers His covenant with them.

[18:25] And that's why I think those next few verses are there. They're recounting the blessings of the covenant. Remember I explained last week about children and flourishing in the land? Well, here it says again, May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children.

May you be blessed by the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. God's covenant to them is clearly in view here. And more so also because throughout the psalm, it is the Lord's covenant name, Yahweh, that's being used, the capitalized L-O-R-D that I spoke about in Psalm 110.

And as I explained last week as well, for us as Christians, the blessings of the covenant are now found in Christ when we put our trust in Him. And as we read from Ephesians, the blessings of the new covenant are forgiveness of sin, being heirs in Christ, and ultimately having a relationship with our Creator, the Lord who is our Maker, Maker of heaven and earth.

So trust in Him, the psalm says, because only He, our Creator and Lord, can truly bless. Now let's turn to the final verses, and it ends this way.

It says, The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He has given to mankind. It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to the place, it is not the dead who praise the Lord,

those who go down to the place of silence.

[19 : 44] Rather, it is we who extol the Lord, both now and forevermore. Praise the Lord. Now I have to say, as I read that initially, it's not immediately clear, is it, why the psalm sort of ends like this.

What is this section connected, how is this section connected with the rest of the psalm? But I think it becomes a bit clearer when we realize that the word extol, in verse 18, is actually the same word used as bless, in verses 12, 13, and 15.

Actually the same root word. So if the response in verse 9 to 15 is to trust the one who is able to bless, then here at the end, the response is to bless the one in whom we trust.

So I think the way the verses work is that in verse 16, when it says, the highest heavens belong to the Lord, is referring to the realm from which God blesses us.

And then at the other extreme, there's the realm of the dead, the place of silence where no praise of the Lord is heard. But in between, for us on earth, this is the place God has given to humanity, to live, to move, and have our being.

[20 : 56] But this is also the place where we who fear the Lord are not to remain silent, but to praise the Lord, to bless Him for His blessing to us. Now as humans, we can't bless the Lord the same way He blesses us, right?

The only blessing we can offer are the praises of our lips. That's what it means for us to bless the Lord. And so if you go back to verse 1, how will the nations know when they ask, where is their God?

Well, only when we praise the Lord, only through the praise of those who fear Him, those who bless the Lord in whom they trust. When we bless the Lord, we give Him the glory that He deserves.

Verse 1. We tell of His love and His faithfulness. We do it so that others, the nations, will know that God's real. That we also do it so that we keep remembering ourselves to trust the Lord.

Now as Christians, the name we are to declare, apart from God's name, is the name of Jesus, isn't it? For as Paul says in Philippians, and I've got that verse up there, it is at the name of Jesus that every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, but then to the glory of God the Father.

[22 : 15] So it's the name of Jesus we bless or praise, but it is God's glory, the Father that gets the glory, including Jesus. So friends, we need to keep telling others about Jesus, about the gospel, to counter the narratives that we get from the world about what success and what fulfillment is all about.

And I guess this is why I think this psalm is actually a corporate psalm. It's written not to be, you know, it could be read alone, but it's not to be read by yourself alone, but to be spoken aloud in the congregation, in church, so that we can affirm to each other what we believe, what we are to trust in, not idols, but in the Lord, for only in Him will we be blessed.

So I thought what we'll do at the end, I know we've already read this psalm a couple of times, but let's do it one more time. let's say it as a prayer, as a declaration to each other, to encourage each other to continue trusting in the Lord.