

# The God Who Grieves

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Date: 12 October 2014

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it's great to welcome the CTC members who usually meet at the same time as us here on Sunday mornings, our junior high group.

I wonder if you're a CTC member, if you just put your hand up. Okay, now those, thank you, you can put it down now. Those people around you, it's your job to welcome those people and make them feel very special at the end of the service.

And if anyone is not made to feel special, come and talk to me. But remember the names of the people around you. Actually, it's really great to have you because what we do at this time in the service is we open the Bible and try and find out what God is saying to us.

So I wonder if you would all open your Bibles to Ezekiel chapter 14. Simon read to us a moment ago, page 701. And this passage tells us something that's so simple, a fourth grader can grab it. And so deep and wonderful that the person who's been the Christian the longest and is the cleverest and wisest and most godly struggles with every day.

[ 1 : 16 ] Ezekiel 14 is the key to how not only we start the Christian life, but how we grow and get strong and continue right to the end.

And it's how if you're in a slump or a bog or a stuckness in your Christian life and that happens, how we get out of it.

The chapter is about idols of the heart. Idols of the heart. And the thing about Christianity, as you know, is that it's not about outward conformity of behavior.

It's about it has to do with our hearts and our relation with God. And when the Bible says heart, it means the deepest part of us. It's hidden from everyone around you and you can hide it as much as you like.

But it's the reason for our choices and our motivations and what we love. And the Bible says that what our hearts do is they attach on to things that we love and we trust and we put our hope in.

[ 2 : 21 ] And these things promise to give us what we really need. And it's either the true God or it's something else. And if it's something else, then it's an idol. But before we get there, it's very hard to jump into the middle of Ezekiel if this is your first time with us.

So let me give you a little tiny review. We're near the end of the Old Testament. God's people, despite God's kindness and grace and goodness and rescue and life-giving, joy-filled goodness, God's people continue to turn away, turn away, turn away and go after other gods all the time. And God warned them and warned them and warned them. And in the end, God has now expelled them from the land. And they've been taken captive by the Babylonians and transported a thousand kilometers away to Babylon.

They are in exile. They've got no hope of the future. They feel like their bones are dried up. They've got no direction and no future whatsoever.

But here's the thing. They still refuse to repent and return to God. Even when they get to Babylon, they say, God, why have you done this to us?

[ 3 : 34 ] They blame God. It's God's fault. You owe us an explanation, God. And so in his great kindness, God takes one of the young men in exile. He's only 25 at the time.

And he calls him to be a prophet. And his name is Ezekiel. And he says to Ezekiel, I'm going to give you messages, but the people won't listen. Which is one of the things you need to know if you're thinking about ministry.

The amazing thing, though, is that God continues to speak through Ezekiel. And he shows us how he sees things.

We look at things through God's eyes, not just 600 BC, but how he looks at us today. And last week we looked at chapter 16. Yes, we're working backwards through the book.

And we saw that God binds himself to us as a lover. That God pitches himself as a perfect husband, loving, and makes covenant promise to us in marriage.

[ 4 : 35 ] This is how the true God is towards us. And he gives himself to us for mutual fellowship and communion and unity and love and intimacy. But what that means is it shows us how God looks at sin.

That sin isn't so much breaking God's rules as it is breaking God's heart. It's not saying God's not real. It's just saying God's not relevant. And when we sin, we abuse and we violate the covenant of love that he's made for us.

And that's why chapter 14 is so important. Because the way in which we do this is through idols in our heart. The way that we push God away, the way that we kind of turn away from God, is not so much the bad things we do, but has to do with setting our hearts on other things which are not God. The way we build walls between ourselves and God, and you know what it's like when there's a wall between you and God, is not so much when we act badly, do things that are immoral.

It's when we take idols into our hearts. So I've got two points. The first is how idols work. And the second is how God works.

[ 5 : 51 ] And the first point is a bit longer than the second because the way idols work in our heart is very layered. And they're sneaky and very subtle.

So I'm going to spend a bit more time on point one. When I use the word idol, what do you think of? Do you think of the TV show where people... I was going to say make fools of themselves, but...

Do you stop watching when they get really good? Yeah, I do too. I do too. I think most people think of idols as primitive objects, you know, worshipped by tribes that are still living in jungles.

They carve out pieces of wood and stone and they make them into a sacred object and bow down and worship them. And we don't do that, right? Well, what Ezekiel 14 tells us is that we have all internalized idols.

We've taken them into our own hearts. Look at the first three verses. I'll just remind you what they say. This is very important if you're in CTC. We continually say, what does the Bible say about this?

[ 6 : 58 ] So then certain of the elders of Israel came to me, this is Ezekiel writing, and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, these men have taken idols into their hearts and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces.

Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? As God looks into our hearts and he says that you have actively taken idols into the deepest part of who you are.

This is why we behave, the way in which we behave. It's why we struggle with the things we struggle with. It comes out of our hearts. Whether we have God as God, as the ultimate thing in life, or whether we've got something else.

You see, if someone bows down to, you know, as a sacred object, like a piece of stone or a block of wood, that's only just one example of how in our hearts that person is betraying God.

But again, the true betrayal starts here. It's whenever we put something else in the place of God, something else over God. This is very helpful for us because our hearts are so slippery.

[ 8 : 10 ] So let me go a layer deeper. We can make idols out of really good things. They're not just bad things. So let's take something that we all think about way too much. Let's take money.

There's not a person in this building who thinks that money can really satisfy us. But we give our hearts to money when we work too hard and ignore our families.

Or when we look at our numbers and watch them going up and down. Or we attach our happiness to some invisible line that if I cross that invisible line, I'll be secure.

Or I'd be really happy if I just had enough money to get that new iPhone or condo or holiday or car. I'm a minister.

And there are idols being a minister, having a good congregation. It's very tempting now to say what I mean by that.

[ 9 : 16 ] But to be really honest with you, I find that I gather new idols into my heart every decade of my life. And the way you know it's an idol is that if I don't get that thing, I become really, really disappointed.

See how helpful this is? It lies underneath my sins and my bad behaviors. See behind my gossiping and my stupid anger that overflows and rage and bitterness and envy and lust and greed is a whole collection of idols because I've attached my heart to something other than God.

And what makes it harder is that we all live in a culture which is full of idols as well. We know this. And we're bombarded by messages all the time that entice us to have other idols and intimidate us if we don't.

So that the idols in our hearts are both generated from inside as well as come and model from the outside. Let me take it a layer deeper. Since God is who he is, the God of wonder, love and grace, the great commandment in the Bible is to love God with all your heart.

And the Bible describes the way we relate to him in terms of love and trust and hope and serving and fear. And what happens is when we attach our hearts to other things, we have false love and false hope and false fear and false serving.

[10:50] What's very important about this passage is God is not talking to people outside the church. He's talking to people inside the church. These are elders of the Jewish community.

And they've come to consult the prophet. They've come to get news. They want good news from the prophet, which seems like a perfectly decent and religious thing to do, doesn't it? They've come to get news from the church.

They've come to get news from the church. They've come with prayers and with questions. Using the right book of common prayer form of service. And they look outwardly very right and righteous. But God sees and he says, yeah, but your hearts are crawling with idols. And I will not listen. Look at verse 4 and 5. Therefore speak to them and say to them, thus says the Lord, anyone of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face and yet comes to the prophet, I, the Lord, will answer him as he comes with a multitude of his idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from me through their idols.

See, going to church, going to Bible study, being a leader, volunteering, all very good things to do. But they will never bring any real contact with the living God while our hearts are full of idols.

[12:16] This is what it looks like from God's sight. Just think about it for a moment. Imagine a husband and wife are married to each other. And one of the spouses comes to the other and says, look, give me access to that savings account because I want a holiday in Europe with my boyfriend.

Or we're going to sell the holiday house because I want to have an apartment downtown where I can meet up with my girlfriend. And it's not going to happen. That's what it's like when we come to God with our idols.

Or it's like one of you teens going to your parents and saying, I want you to sell off the retirement package and give it to me because my drug habit is very expensive and I'm going to take the family car to Mexico next week.

Or something like that. See, when God looks at our hearts, he answers us according to the infestation, the multitude of idols which are there. Why?

Because he wants real communion. He doesn't just want the outside practice. This is really important, you see. It's not so much about the good or the evil that you've done.

[13:28] It has to do with the place of God in your hearts. And whether we're pursuing and loving him or something else. Let me take it even a layer deeper. You think about the Ten Commandments.

Martin Luther was one of the great reformers in the 16th century and he meditated very deeply and I think he came to the conclusion of why the first commandment is the first. Remember the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me.

Positively, that means, of course, that we look to God alone for our hope and our love and our joy and our food and our drink. And as Dan said really poorly to the kids this morning, I really enjoyed that.

He is the ultimate source of our blessing. So the turkey that you eat tomorrow night, yes, it might have come via your parents and Safeway and the farm, but ultimately it comes from God.

Last year at this time, I knew the name of the turkey that I ate. I'll tell that story another time. Just turn the Ten Commandments around for a moment.

[14:39] What that means is that every form of disobedience is idolatry. Anytime we sin, it's because I've put something other than God in the top place in my life.

You cannot, this is what Luther says, you cannot break Commandments 2 to 10 without breaking Commandment number 1. So, if you commit adultery, it's because something else has become your God in place of the real God.

Or take lying. We all lie. Why? Well, is it because you need someone's approval, you're afraid of their opinion about you? It just means something else or someone else has become God in the place of the real God.

Or take coveting. If you're coveting someone or something, you know, the latest game or the latest house or popularity, anything. If you set your heart on it and crave, crave after it, it means you might have taken something good and you've placed it in the place of God because coveting is idolatry. Because everything we think and everything we feel and everything we do comes out of relation with God. Let me take it a layer deeper. Why do we do this?

[15:53] And I think Ezekiel 14 is so important here. Three times in just these 11 verses, God refers to how we take idols into our hearts. And each time, did you notice, there's a second matching phrase.

Verse 3, verse 4, verse 7. To take idols into our hearts means also to set, they set their stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces.

Think about this for a moment. A stumbling block is something that makes you, that trips you up. And it can be something good, you know, holiday, influence, health.

But the way a stumbling block trips you up is if you just don't see it. And what God is saying is we put these things before our faces and we stumble over them because they're before our faces and we are blind to the idols in our hearts.

They're invisible to us. And I think you'll agree that the deeper the idol, the more blind we are. We have life-driving patterns of thought, of desires and fears, of which I'm guessing we're pretty unaware.

[17:08] And the Bible says we're profoundly self-deceived about these things. Let me go one level deeper before we move to our second point. And I think the reason for this is that the way idols work is they take one of the characteristics of God and they try and counterfeit, make a copy of it, imitate that to us.

It might be God as our shepherd or God as our king or God as our judge or God as our saviour. And the idol will take that and will say, I can give you what God promises to give you.

And it makes promises and threats which are false. And you know you're worshipping an idol when you say something like this to yourself, if only I had that, I would be okay.

And if I don't, I'll be devastated. Or if only I could feel that, I would be fine. And if I don't, I'll be devastated.

Or if only I could experience this, all would be well. But if I don't, I'll be devastated. I have a friend who's not a Christian and she told me this last week as we were talking that the deepest purpose of her life was to make everyone happy.

[18:31] I don't know how we got onto this. And I said to her, really? And she said, absolutely, it's the number one rule of my life. I said, what happens when you fail? And the eyebrows went up and she had absolutely zero answer.

I told her that I wasn't happy. This is the way idols work.

They define good and evil in different ways from the way God does. We take something that's really important and good in itself and instead of being a good thing in our lives, we make it the ultimate thing.

And that produces false laws and false definitions of success and failure and we are blessed and cursed according to whether we live to that standard. So you think about, you know, take the area of pride.

That's where we set ourselves up as God. And you can see your own pride in behaviours like rage and manipulation and the compulsion to control others.

[19:33] you know, the kind of person who just has to dominate conversation. Or take the fear of man, you know, being afraid of others' opinions. That's setting other people up as God and that'll show itself in self-consciousness and fear and anxiety and a sense of failure and inferiority and perfectionism.

this is how idols work and I think we need to move to the second point and ask the question, how does God work? Because chapter 14 is a terrific gift.

God's intention is not to judge and blame, it's to expose what's going on so that he can heal and he can help. And even though our hearts are crowded with idols, God still answers us.

Look what he does with these people. God says, these elders have come to me with a multitude of idols and he answers them. He doesn't give them what they want but he gives them what they need and he places his finger on the idols and it's exactly the same thing for us.

We come to church thinking all our problems are external problems or life problems or circumstances and we hear God's word and he says, no, no, actually they're spiritual and internal. [ 20 : 46 ] And in verse 6, the passage takes an amazing change and God explains now how the real process of growth and change comes when I begin to see my idols and distortions and how I substitute other things for God.

So let me read verse 6. This is just remarkable. Therefore God says, say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God, repent and turn away from your idols and turn away your faces from all your abominations.

And in the original, the word repent and turn away is the same word. God says, turn, turn, turn. Repent, repent, repent.

Because repentance is not just something which you begin the Christian life with. Repentance is the beginning of the Christian life. It's the middle of the Christian life and it is the end of the Christian life.

And you could have been a Christian for 20, 30 or 40 years and you could proudly say Christ is my life and my joy but the voices of the idols keep saying over and over, they keep making promises and threats and we still feel in our heart of hearts that somehow God is not enough that I have needs that need to be met.

[ 22 : 01 ] But this is it. This is the dynamic of ongoing change in our lives. It comes from deepening repentance toward God, rooting out the false gods and a deepening trust in the real God.

I don't know if you're aware of this but there are many Christians who think repentance is just for the beginning of the Christian life or when you've done something really bad. It's not.

It's meant to be an ongoing daily process of identifying and rooting out the idols. That's why trying to change behaviours by trying to change behaviours doesn't really work.

If you try and change your behaviours it'll either make you full of guilt if it doesn't work or full of pride if it does but it leaves the idols basically intact. A great example yesterday in the Vancouver Sun Douglas Todd had an article on the gratitude challenge.

This is the social media buzz right now coming up to this weekend where sites are saying we must be thankful, we must be thankful, we must be thankful and Todd argues the reason why is it'll lower your stress and blood pressure make you happier people and it will.

[ 23 : 12 ] The funny thing about the article is there's just one thing missing and that is who we're thankful to. Don't get me wrong I would wish that you were all much more happy and thankful.

But being thankful without thanking God won't disturb the idols in your heart. we can even change our behaviours by exchanging one idol for another.

I mean just imagine you're someone who makes an idol out of the opinion of others. You are slavishly devoted to trying to please other people. You decide there's no way for me to live so you buy the books and you work very hard and you realise the best way is to stop caring about what other people think and care more about your own opinion of yourself and you grow in confidence and self-esteem and things seem to work very well.

It won't bring true life change won't change your heart because it's not repentance. It's just replacing one idol with another one. It'll work better outwardly likely but without repentance it's just moralism. And we have a Christian version of this which avoids repentance. It's speaking about God's unconditional love. You might have heard this.

[ 24 : 32 ] The idea is God accepts me unconditionally. It's not a biblical idea. Let me give you a quote from an essay I read this week. The gospel is better than unconditional love.

The gospel says God accepts you just as Christ is not as you are. Do you understand?

God has contra-conditional love for you. God never accepts me as I am. He accepts me as I am in Jesus Christ. So how does this actually work?

How do we grow and get at this? There are two things. I'm going to finish with these things. The first is we have to root out the idols and we have to replace them with the true God. Rooting out and replacing.

The first step rooting out is to see and understand that my heart is a factory for idols. Then I think we have to begin to figure out what idols I have and I, as I say, I don't think this is easy.

[ 25 : 35 ] But if the way idols become a stumbling block is I don't see them, the best way to keep stumbling along in the Christian life is to pretend you don't have any idols in your heart.

It's when you begin to pray and see what's motivating you. There's something in your heart that's more important to God. That, I think, is the start. but it requires a very honest evaluation of yourself, of your behaviours and compulsions and anxieties and addictions.

Am I feeling this way? Am I behaving this way because something, is there something more important to me than God? And it's not just, the question is not just what's motivating me but who is the master of this set of behaviours and anxieties that I have?

And I think to root them out requires, when you see it, a ruthless rejection of all those things that are functioning in my life is more important than God. That's rooting out. And secondly, replacing them with true faith in the true God.

I think true repentance is seeing the true God and how he accepts me. See, true repentance isn't self-pity or remorse.

[ 26 : 49 ] You can go for many years as a Christian in cycles of self-pity. Self-pity is feeling bad about what you've done and how you've messed up your life. It's thinking, you know, this person in my position shouldn't be doing this anymore.

It's thinking about the consequences of the sin and the problems that follow. You may be thinking, well, God will get me if I keep doing this. Self-pity is hating the consequences but not the sin.

It's hating the consequences but still loving the sin. And the point of Ezekiel 14 is that true repentance comes from seeing the true God.

This is why I say this to you CTCers who are still with us. That's why we open the Bible week by week because these people came to God with an agenda but God has a different agenda.

It's when God speaks to us through his word that's where we get to see where our idols are to root them out and replace them. That's why we try and hear humbly and hungrily week by week.

[ 27 : 55 ] We see what sin does to God. We see the impact of sin on him. It's not enough, you see, to identify your idols and reject them and not fill your life and attach your heart to God because if you just do one without the other you'll have another forest of idols by Monday.

We can only do this by going to God, by repenting of our idols and by setting our hearts on him, by resting our whole hearts on him for our joy and our peace and seeing the beauty of his grace and his love and his acceptance and that's why the last verse comes in chapter 14 verse 11.

I'll leave you with this. This is God's purpose in chapter 14. That the house of Israel may no more go astray from me nor defile themselves any more with their transgressions but that they may be my people and I their God that's what God's after.

Let's kneel and pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.