

The God Who Grieves

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Date: 12 October 2014

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, good evening. If you're new, my name is Aaron. Jordan and I book after the service. I'd love to meet you afterwards, if you want to stick around and say hi to either one of us.
- I met some great people last week. Fantastic. Local people, new people, just brilliant. Lovely, lovely people. If you are new and you want us to know about that, you can fill out this little thing at the back of the service sheet.
- Where is it? Just in the back, it's called Connect. Fold it over, rip it out, put it in a red bag over there. We do have a Facebook group as well, which is helpful to join if you want to know what's going on in our community.
- All right. And now we come to the sermon. Well, you've heard the passage. And after last week's passage, it's nice to have a text that only mentions whoring twice, isn't it?
- If you're new, just forget what I said. So we're looking at two different chapters in Ezekiel. They're quite closely related.
- [1 : 0 7] You've heard the readings. It's not hard to guess what they're about. There's three major concerns. Judgment, idolatry, and grace. The big one of those is idolatry, and that's the one I'd like to spend most time talking about.
- So what I'd like to do is I'd like to get into the texts, and then I'd like to sort of talk about idolatry more sort of generally, because idolatry is not just a major concern of this passage.
- It's one of, if not the most frequently discussed problems in Scripture. I mean, just think about the Ten Commandments. For example, the first commandment, That's kind of about idolatry, isn't it?
- The second one, Pretty sure that one's about idolatry too.
- So I don't know if you've given much thought to idols, but they're a pretty big deal in the Bible. Let's look at chapter 6, shall we, to start off with. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel and prophesy against them and say, You mountains, hear the word of the Lord.
- [2 : 2 4] Thus says the Lord God to the mountains and the hills and ravines and valleys. Behold, I'll bring a sword upon you. I will destroy your high places. At first glance there, you sort of go, Right, this is about judgment.
- But it raises the question straight away, doesn't it? What exactly is wrong with mountains? I think God is saying to the mountains, Ah, you're gone. I will get you.
- I mean, if you didn't know, you'd look at that and go, There's something wrong with mountains. Now, cast your mind back to our psalm, Psalm 121. What's the first line there?
- Psalm 121. Can you see that there? I lift my eyes up to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.
- Ever wonder what that meant? You can make it sound quite lovely, right? I lift my eyes up to the hills, to the mountains, just because I like to look at them and think about them.

[3 : 24] Have you ever wondered what that meant? You know, it's about, It's not saying look up to the mountains and be inspired by them. It's not saying look up to the mountains because they represent kind of like trials or something.

Or, I don't know. It's saying, It's actually saying don't look at the mountains. You can kind of feel like it says look at the mountains. It's actually don't look at the mountains for help. And why would it be saying that?

Because pagan worship, in these times, mostly Baal and Asherah, pagan worship was practiced on mountains and hills. Shrines were set up there.

They planted big groves of trees and there'd be wooden idols and these idols were supposed to sort of imbue the divinity of the gods and it was all a bit lurid and a bit sketchy because there was male and female temple prostitutes and kind of fairly saucy kind of rituals and stuff.

And people would go to these shrines and the promise of the shrines was, of course, we can help you. You need rain. You need to get pregnant. You need a good crop. You need to ward off demons. We've got the stuff here.

[4 : 27] Just come and do some stuff. You know, do some stuff and, oh, be great. You know, you'll get yourself sorted. So the psalm here is saying, Don't look at those mountains because it's referring to the idolatry that happens on those mountains.

It's saying look to God. So that's what the first part of chapter 6 is about. God says to Ezekiel, Turn to the mountains and pronounce judgment on them because that's where the pagan worship is happening. You think, Well, is this maybe a bit harsh though?

I mean, there's a few naked hippies running around doing weird stuff up in the mountains. Are we really concerned about that? Some minor league religions doing weird stuff up there?

I mean, is this major concern for God? Seriously? Who cares? Here's the thing. This was just not a small issue for God's people. This was ruining God's people.

Idol worship was, if this is sort of like, you know, Israel and Jerusalem and stuff, right? Idol worship was the predominant form of religious practice everywhere else.

[5 : 33] And we remember the last few weeks, we've been talking about Jerusalem was sort of cozying up to these foreign nations. And they would do that. They'd make these kind of treaties with them.

And by sort of inviting a relationship with these foreign nations and states and stuff, they'd actually end up inviting their gods with them. And it would seem, reading through Ezekiel, that there was only a few Israelites that had sufficient faith to actually resist the religious pressure of the rest of the whole world.

Orthodoxy was a minority religion. So it's not a small thing amongst God's people. Idol worship prevailed. So we see it a bit in the text already, but what I'd like you to get here is how impassioned God's response is to idolatry.

On the one hand, he's heartbroken, first verse 9. I have been broken over their whoring heart, that they've departed from me. And over their eyes, they go whoring after their idols.

I mean, it's an astounding passage. We talked about this a lot last week, that sin, it sort of reframed sin for us, right? It casts God as our lover, our spouse, amongst all the other images of God as well.

[6 : 59] There was this idea of God as lover, and it was saying that, you know, sin is not so much just breaking rules, it's breaking God's heart. It's betraying a relationship. So on one hand, we see this picture of God who is heartbroken, and on the other hand, you really can't miss the fury of God.

He will not stand by while his people reject his grace and invite other gods into their heart. Let me read some selected bits from the passage here just to get that across.

Actually, there is one that's kind of, when I read it, I thought, that's interesting. Verse 11, Clap your hands, stamp your feet, for alas the evil abominations, et cetera. My daughter, they sing a song down in Sunday school that begins with that, don't they?

Clap your hands, stamp your feet, turn around, reach up high, bend down low, we're friends of Jesus, hello. So, my daughter sings that, right?

So I'm looking at this, clap your hands, stamp your feet, you're all gonna die, is basically this one. So it's a different type of message, isn't it?

[8 : 13] Here we go, listen to this. Behold, I, even I will bring a sword upon you, I'll destroy your high places, this is verse 4, your altars will become desolate, your incense altars broken, I will cast down your slain before your idols.

Then it talks about just bodies laying about these tombs, I think it's some kind of macabre picture of maybe the orgies that went on there, or something like that, it's just, it's really full on. Verse 6, wherever you dwell, the city shall be a waste, and the high places ruined, your altars will be a waste and ruined, your idols broken, destroyed, your incense altars cut down, your works wiped out, because of the evil abominations of the house of Israel.

For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, by pestilence. He who is far off, shall die of pestilence, he who is near, shall fall by the sword, he who is left, and still preserved, shall die of famine, thus, I will send my fury upon you.

I will stretch out my hand against them, and make the land desolate and wait. God is against idolatry. He is passionately opposed to idolatry.

And if you're not convinced of that, that word idol, literally, it's feces, it means feces, it's like sheep's feces. It's like a kind of a, like almost like a crass word he's using there.

[9 : 37] But it's not all fire and brimstone. We see in the passage, God's anger is never so hot that it overwhelms grace, that it cancels out grace. We talked about this in the last couple of weeks, you know, that when God judges, he judges through tears.

This is, this is, two weeks ago we said that God, God does take no pleasure in judgment. In Jeremiah, he talks about it as his alien work, his, his, his desire is to give life.

So even though the Israelites were on the whole apostate, God's judgment was not annihilation. Verse eight, yet, I will leave some of you alive. See, God is still committed to his covenant.

He still will have his people. We're going to talk more about that later on. So anyway, so you might have a question in your mind. again, what, what is so particularly wrong with idolatry though?

That it elicits such a devastating response from God. Move over to chapter 14 there. You know, a caricature of idol worship is people, primitive peoples, bowing down to wooden figurines, asking for divine favor, right?

[11 : 04] And still happens in countless places in the world. But that doesn't seem to be what chapter 14 is about, is it? And that's not the key problem God is addressing here.

He's talking about idolatry, but three times, he talks about idolatry of the heart, of your heart. So the basic gist of kind of the storyline here is that some, some elders who are in exile, remember this is a people in exile, God, the Babylonians have forcibly deported about 2,000 people from Jerusalem.

This happened because of God's judgment and brought them to Babylon, the other side of the world in their mind. So all the leaders kind of, of, of Babylon. And anyway, so the basic, just the story is, is some, some of the elders come to Ezekiel, who's a prophet, and say, Hey, give us a word from God.

That's verse 15. Give us a word from God. We want to hear from God. But God sees what's going on. And he says, these men have taken idols into their heart. He repeats that several times. They've got idols in their heart.

And as a result of these idols, using words from the passage, God describes this situation. He says, it's a stumbling block. They're estranged from me.

[12 : 14] Verse five, they have turned away. It's an abomination. It separates them from me. It's iniquity. They're cut off. Defiled. Transgressors. Those are the words it uses to describe what's going on in their, in their life as a result of idols of the heart.

So what's God's response to the idolatry of the heart? Well, he says, well, if I ask for a word, I'm going to, I'm going to tell them, I'm going to respond directly to them.

And my direct response is going to be in the form of, uh, catastrophic judgment. And he says that in a number of ways, it's, verse eight's particularly pointy. I think it says, I will set my face against them.

Again, the question, why is God so against idolatry? Like, what's the big deal? Is it not just like a, it's a sin, it's like another sin, whatever.

It's because of this. It's because idolatry is, it's the center of ourselves, our heart. It's the center of ourselves, it's the center of ourselves, rejecting ultimate truth.

[13 : 22] It's a heart orientation away from God. Think about this. Think about it like this. So in the beginning, humans were created, Genesis one, humans were created to do what?

To worship and serve God, and to rule over all created things in God's name. Instead, we fell into sin. And when Paul, when he summarizes the fall of humanity in Romans one, he describes it in terms of idolatry.

And he says this, they exchanged the glory of the immortal God and worshiped and served, created things rather than the creator. So instead of worshiping God and ruling over created things, we worshiped created things and let them rule over us.

So we reversed the order that God set in place. Why is God so against idolatry? Because it's the opposite of how things are supposed to be.

What's the implication of this reversal? It's not just a muddled theology. It's not just that you've got a slightly off theology. The implication is that idolatry is the source of all sin.

[14 : 28] Let's go back to the Ten Commandments. So the first two we've discussed, they seem to be talking about idolatry. Then there's three to ten. Coveting, etc.

Murder, adultery, etc. Why the order? Why have these first two then the other ones? Luther says, Martin Luther, says that it's because the fundamental problem of law-breaking, God's law-breaking, is always idolatry.

In other words, we never break three to ten without first breaking one to two. Here's a quote from the great man himself. I mean, this is 500 years old, so it's kind of clunky, right, how it's said, but stay with me here.

All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings trust in his favor, grace, or goodwill, but seek favor in other things in themselves, do not keep this first commandment and that practice real idolatry.

Even if they were to do the works of all the other commandments and in addition all the prayers, obedience, patience, and chastity of all the saints combined, the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but sham, show, and pretense.

[15 : 44] I hope you see where we're going here. Why God is so dead set against idolatry. Because it is not this very rare sin found only amongst primitive peoples in some obscure part of the world.

It's because idolatry is the opposite of faith. It's the sin of all humanity. Now at this point you might say very reasonably, Aaron, stop.

Just stop. Just stop. And just say, what is, in one sentence, what are you talking about when you say idolatry? Exactly how would you define idolatry? Here it is in one sentence.

An idol is simply something we make more important than God. Now think about how that works out in your life. If something has captured your heart, that will be your main motivator.

That's why Luther says it's kind of the main cause of sin, right? Idolatry. So why do we lie or seek out sexual satisfaction in unhealthy ways or fail to keep promises?

[16:54] You could answer, I'm weak, I'm a sinner. That is true in a very general sense. Specifically though, it's because there's something in your heart that you desire more than you desire Jesus.

something you feel you must have in order to be happy. I must not look bad. That would be an unbearable feeling. So I lie. I must be happy no matter what.

So I'm going to do whatever I need to do to feel pleasure. And this is why we do anything. This is why we do anything, good or bad, isn't it?

But there is some deep desire in our hearts. There's something in our hearts that motivates us and it's God and it can be an idol. And you might think, is this some kind of newish Christian idea, some sort of psychologizing of sin thing?

It's a very reasonable thing to think. But so let me give you a quote from Tertullian who was a Christian writer who wrote about 200 AD. Again, it's ancient words, right?

[18:00] So stay with me. The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment is idolatry. For although each single fault retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet it is marked off under the general account of idolatry.

Thus it comes to pass that in idolatry all crimes are detected and in all crimes, idolatry. Now, idolatry is not some rare sin.

Idolatry was in the hearts of the leaders of the leaders in Jerusalem. According to Ezekiel 14, leaders came to speak to Ezekiel. So this is 2,000 leaders taken, the best of the best taken from Jerusalem to Babylon.

The leaders of the leaders went to speak to Ezekiel and it was those guys that had idols in their hearts. Idols are not just found in ancient pagan rituals.

They live very well in educated human hearts. So don't make the mistake of marginalizing this idolatry, this sin over here, it's somebody else's problem, it's weird people, it's crazy hippies up in the mountains.

[19:16] Folks, it is most likely your biggest problem. Over the last year, as I've been thinking about how I'm going with God, this is the biggest thing God's been talking to me about is the idols in my heart.

Now, having said that, how do we know what our idols are and what do we do about them? Let me just speak now sort of topically about idols for a little bit and we'll come back to the text. How to identify them.

One way would be to examine your extreme emotions. Okay? For example, anxiety. This is a big one for me. If your God is approval, if you feel approval is threatened in your life, you will feel deeply shaken by that.

You'll feel anxiety coming up. Bitterness, anger. If your God is, say, material wealth and you feel like there's something standing between you and that and this is your ultimate thing in life, goodness, that emotion will become incredibly intensified.

Perhaps it's boredom or emptiness. This could be a product of an idol in your heart as well. There's a guy, there's a book called Two Worlds, Notes on Death of Modernity in America and Russia.

[20 : 41] This is kind of a dense little quite here, but I thought it was really interesting. To be bored is to feel empty. Meaningless boredom is an anticipatory form of being dead.

To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idols, when any of those values are lost, boredom becomes pathological and compulsive.

My subjectively experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected towards the whole cosmos. The picture of the self is called despair. I'll put that up on Facebook.

That's really interesting. In those situations, when we feel these things, these emotions, you know, and I just picked three there, inordinately more than you know you probably should, ask yourself, why am I so angry or bitter or scared or fearful or filled with such self-loathing?

Is there something too important to me? Have I elevated elevated to a necessity something in my life that is not a necessity? What is my heart grasping for?

[21 : 45] That it presents in such emotions. Now, as a caveat, I'm just going to tell you something you know. Anxiety, anger, and these things can also be presentations of other mental health problems which can be biological or caused by trauma.

My interest here is how idolatry, how they're presented in idolatry. So don't think I'm sort of demonizing mental health problems. Okay, idolatry, slippery thing.

So, one way is you could examine sort of persistent negative emotions and go, what is that trying to do? What is it trying to say? God help me. What is it trying to say to me? Another one would be to ask yourself some simple questions.

Remember, an idol could be anything, a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, hope, an image, a pleasure, a hero, an idea, a political party, anything.

They can be very good things. Often they're very good things that have become elevated. Like preaching, for example. I could have an idol of preaching which means that if I retire, let's say I retired at 65, for example, I would be devastated.

[23 : 03] I feel like my life has no meaning anymore because I wouldn't be preaching. I have a friend of mine who has a relative who used to preach a lot. It did quite well in preaching and he admitted to his relative that he was, this is the aging gentleman, that he was terrified of the day the phone would stop ringing when people would stop calling him to come and preach at the church.

That's an idol. It's a very good thing but it's an idol still. So some questions which might help you identify them. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most? What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live?

What keeps me going? What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult? What do I think of most easily? What does my mind go to when I'm free?

What preoccupies me? What prayer, unanswered, would make me seriously think about turning away from God? What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of? What do I really want and expect out of life?

What really makes me happy? You might think that was all a bit hokey. I'm just trying to get at what rules your behavior.

[24 : 19] Is it God or is it an idol? I mean, something drives you. What is it? Something motivates you. What is it? And that's a really good question because it's the motivation question. The motivation question is the lordship question in your heart, I think.

You might find, you could say, I'll put these questions on Facebook. You might find that as you go through these questions, something common emerges out of those. I know for me, I can look at those and I can go, yep, significance, achievement, straight away.

It's not that hard. And I could talk more about that. Yeah, maybe I should, just to give you an example. So, I was talking to a guy recently and we were talking about this kind of thing and he talked about this great need he has in his life to achieve.

This is not Jordan, by the way, we're talking about. No, this one's weird. It's such a weird. No, we were, can I say that out loud?

I didn't mean to. And, we're talking about why that is and it was because he came from this quite fabulously successful family. This is great drive, I've got to succeed, I've got to succeed, make people proud of me, do well in life, right?

[25 : 32] Mine is the exact opposite background with the same idol, right? So, my father was a janitor and so we were very blue collar, no one in my family ever finished high school, I was the first person to finish high school, go to university, right?

And, so I have this idol that I must succeed, I must achieve, I must be thought of as significant and what's driving that is I'm trying to escape something, this person's trying to live up to something and they both have their, like their claws, it's got its claws in my heart and I know sometimes it rules my heart and here's the thing about it, you transfer it to different times in your life, so I had it at university, I had it at Regent College, I can still feel it as a pastor of a church, you know, I look out and I see empty seats, it's not people, isn't that terrible?

Anyway, I should probably pray about that. Alright, this is, give an example, final part of the sermon, how do we deal with these idols in our heart? You know, there are three approaches, two of them are pretty bad, one of them is the best way to do it.

One way you can deal with it is you can moralise the problem, right? So let's say you have an idol in your heart and it presents itself in really unhealthy ways and unhealthy behaviour. You can moralise the problem, strategy one, moralise the problem.

The analysis is this, you're doing something wrong stop it. Let's say you have this great need for people to think you're fantastic, approval idol, and so you lie, you lie.

[27 : 15] To moralise the problem was to say, just stop doing it. I mean, obviously that's pretty unhelpful because it doesn't go to idol behind the sin, it doesn't work. It's the kind of approach you'd find in a not very thoughtful, conservative, Christian environment.

Another approach would be to psychologise the problem. This approach would focus on your feelings. A guy called David Paulinson wrote a fantastic article called Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair in the Journal of Biblical Counselling from, this is 1995, I can put it on Facebook as well, it's really interesting.

And he says this, he says, Christian counsellors, and he's talking about bad Christian counsellors, he says, Christian counsellors with a psychologising drift typically have a genuine interest in the motivation that underlies the problem behaviour.

So that's good. Get to the motivation, right? But he goes on, you feel horrible and act badly because your needs aren't being met because your family didn't meet them, as an example, case study.

And he says, the logic of bad therapy says this, the therapist will say, I accept you, God accepts you, your needs can be met, you can change. So God loves you, becomes a bit of a tool to meet emotional needs in a person who feels like a failure.

[28 : 22] So that's like a therapeutic approach. Here's the issue with this. There's a behaviour, there's a feeling under that which drives that, right? Under that can be an idol and you've got to go to that idol.

As an example, an achievement, like an achievement idol, right? So let's say somebody like me has an achievement idol. So my unbearable feeling is I can't disappoint, I've got to do really well at everything I try, I work too hard, over plan.

A moralising strategy would be stop doing that, Aaron, or, secondly, good on you, it's a virtue, you know, which would be weird. A psychologising strategy for that would be to get everyone to say to me all the time, oh, Aaron, you're so great.

You're doing such a good job. We just love you. I mean, that's nice, it's lovely, but it's not transformative. And in fact, you're just rewarding my idol. The problem with idol is completely insatiable.

No matter how many times you say that to me, I'd still think I was not good enough. So you can moralise the problem, you can psychologise the problem. Here's the approach of the text. It's the gospel approach.

[29 : 39] The gospel analysis of the problem is this. Your problem is that you are looking for something besides Christ for your happiness. The solution, the text says, the solution to this idol, verse 6, chapter 14, repent and turn away from your idols.

Turn away your faces from all your abominations. This is where the sermon's been going the whole time and I'm finishing shortly. The solution is repent and turn away from your idols.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, Aaron, you're such a Christian. But think about this. This is not, I'm not just kind of like plastering it, trying a bit of like, you know, Christianity on a significant problem you have.

It's, your idols drive your feelings, their motivation, their what's driving your behaviour. So folks, as simply as I can say it, I'll say this. You will only be free from the governing effects of idols to the degree that you do, one, repent of your idols and two, believe in the saving work of Jesus.

Back to the example. Overworking because I have, I can't stand disapproval, I need to achieve. The moraliser says, work is a virtue, you're doing well or stop it, Aaron, stop working so hard.

[30 : 59] The psychoanalyst says, I accept you, I love you, you're fantastic, you're great just as you are. Which again, I mean, the gospel is so much better than that, isn't it? Because the gospel doesn't say, I accept you, you're great as you are.

The gospel says, God accepts you as Jesus is, not as you are. Anyway, the gospel approach to this problem is this, God forgive me. God forgive me.

God forgive me for placing my significance in the hands of a job. A job. My desire to be thought of as worthwhile and high achieving has too high a place in my heart.

It's an idol. God, forgive me. God, I want my greatest desire to be you. That's the strategy. And actually, a good Christian counselor will do that.

Repent. Repent and believe. As I'm finishing here, folks, I hope you know that repentance isn't a one-time deal when it comes to this kind of stuff. Folks, I collect, you know, I collect idols like, like weird books on theology.

[32 : 12] I've got tons of them. Repentance is not a one-time thing. You know, on Sundays, we've got this liturgy and the liturgy where we kneel and we confess our sins to God.

This is supposed to be, you don't do this on Satan, this is supposed to be a model of how you live the rest of your life. We kneel every Sunday, confess our sins because repentance is not just the start of the Christian life, it's how it looks moving forward until Christ returns.

You know, Christian living, it's, Christian living is the ongoing purging of idols in your life. You know, here's a good takeaway. I'll finish here. In the final, the last verse, verse 11, God's explaining why he's going to bring judgment and why he's going to make such an example of Jerusalem.

He says, You know, with all the covenants of God, if you look up all the covenants, the last bit of that verse, that I might be their God and that they be my people, that's used as sort of a summary purpose of God in those.

It says very succinctly what God is about, what God's done. God's saying, I'm your God. You were made for me. I'm giving myself to you continuously. I'm giving myself to you.

[33 : 30] Give your heart to me. You do anything else, it's a rejection of the truth that lies in the heart of the universe. You were made to be covenantal, people. You were made to be covenantal.

You will enter a covenant service with whatever captures your imagination, with whatever captures your heart. Folks, just make sure that's Jesus. Let that be Jesus. Amen.