

Blind Devotion

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Date: 16 July 2023

Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] I'm going to begin our worship and singing, first of all, this evening from Psalm 96a. Psalm 96a, that's on page 126. The tune is Glasgow.

We're singing verses 1 to 10. O sing a new song to the Lord, sing praises to his name, and his salvation day by day let all the earth proclaim, his glory and his mighty deeds to every land declare, how great and awesome is the Lord, with him no gods compare.

Psalm 96a, we're singing verses 1 to 10. If you're able to stand, please stand to sing. O sing a new song to the Lord, sing praises to his name, and his salvation day by day.

Let all the earth proclaim, his glory and his mighty deeds to every land declare, how great, and awesome is the Lord, with him no gods compare.

For other gods are wood and stone, the Lord made heavens high.

[2 : 14] all power and majesty and his, he dwell in glorious light.

All nations to the Lord has cry, the glory that is due.

Glory and strength as cry to God, and praise his name, my youth.

Enter his court with joy and grace, and offer thee with you.

Worship the Lord in holy fear, all earth behold him above.

[3 : 45] Tell every land the Lord is king, he establishes the earth.

And can all prove, the Lord will judge the peoples in his truth.

Now we're going to pray, let's join together as we call upon the Lord. Gracious and eternal God, what wonderful truths you have given us in these words that we have sung, exclaiming and setting out for us the glory and the majesty and the greatness of our God, the uniqueness of our God, the fact that there is none like you in the whole creation, for you are the creator, you are the one who is above all things that exist.

We thank you, Lord, tonight that this is our portion in life, that we are privileged to come and call upon your name and join together in worship. And we give thanks, Lord, for the way in which your word has guided us already to such high thoughts about you, and to such thoughts about ourselves as we would humble ourselves in your presence and would come and bring an offering, an offering of praise and of thanksgiving to you.

And we pray, Lord, that you would draw near to us. We seek to draw near to you, and we know from your word that if we draw near to God, that he will draw near to us.

[5 : 40] That is your promise. And we ask that you would help us, Lord, tonight to experience the reality of that promise for ourselves. For it would be but an empty gathering for us, O Lord, if we only met with one another, precious though that is in itself.

Yet, Lord, we ask that we will know of a meeting with you, of a fellowship with you, of a communion deep in our souls with our creator and our saviour.

And, Lord, we ask tonight that your Holy Spirit will draw us, that you would work in our hearts, work in our minds, enlightening our minds further in the knowledge of your truth.

We pray that we may once again see the great privilege we have of knowing and confessing you as our God, above all other false gods in the world, as we have been reading and singing in this psalm.

O Lord, our God, we thank you that you have delivered us from any thoughts that there may be rivals to you. And yet we confess that so often, Lord, we find ourselves giving our devotion all too much to those things of this present age, and that we find ourselves so easily distracted, O Lord, from focusing our minds upon you and from placing you foremost in our thoughts and actions day by day.

[7 : 05] We come before you again tonight, Lord, confessing our need of your forgiveness and cleansing, confessing, Lord, that we appear before you defiled in our sins, that we sin against you

every day we live.

Indeed, from hour to hour we are conscious, Lord, that we sin against you, that sin is very much a part of our fallenness and comes to the fore in our thoughts and actions.

And we pray tonight, Lord, for that cleansing of our lives. We ask that you would draw us to yourself, that we may in our confession come to realize the truth of your word once again, even though we may have known your forgiveness in times gone by.

Yet we thank you that every confession of our sin, Lord, as we engage in that in your presence, is met with the promise that if we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So we pray that your holy word will be beneficial to us tonight. We thank you for it. We thank you that it is so central to our worship, O Lord, that you have taught us the importance of having your word central in our worship.

[8 : 22] For it is by your word indeed that we are guided faithfully and infallibly to those things that have to do with your glory and your praise and your worship.

And we do pray, O Lord, that you would open up our minds to receive your word once again. Help us in our understanding of it. Help us in our conveyance of it to the world around us, as we've been singing, to tell every land that the Lord is king.

Lord, help us, we pray, to do this in our own locality and beyond, wherever we have opportunity to make you known. Give us grace, Lord, to take advantage of that opportunity and to seek to fulfill the remit you have given your people in the world, to go forth to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Lord Jesus and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them all things that you have commanded us.

We thank you for every evidence of your blessing that we have from day to day, from week to week. We give thanks for that in our own lives personally. We give thanks, Lord, in the life of the congregation for continued evidence of your blessing.

And we seek further that you would bless us and bless the gospel to us. We pray that we may be more and more a light in the world in which you have placed us, that we, as we seek to live for you, would form, Lord, that light that reaches out into the darkest recesses of society.

[9 : 54] And to that end, we pray that you would use us and enable us in all our activities, O Lord, to know that you are guiding us, that you are blessing all that we seek to do in your name.

We pray for your guidance in all of these things. We ask that you would help us as we seek, Lord, to know how to reach out with the gospel, how to confront the thinking of our age, how to go forth and engage with people who themselves may not at all care for the gospel, may be hostile to it, and all kinds of ideologies that we meet with in our society.

Lord, we pray that you would grant us help, that you would grant us, that your Spirit may guide us and may further teach us in these ways. We pray that you would bless all those who are preparing themselves, O Lord, for the ministry of the gospel.

We pray for Scott with ourselves. We pray for all his fellow trainee ministers. We ask that you would bless them as they receive their training and teaching.

We pray, Lord, that they will indeed form a great force in the world for good and that you would use them, Lord, as even now they are preparing for permanent ministry.

[11 : 09] We pray that you would continue to use them and encourage them. And we ask, O God, that you would give to them the weight with all and the resources of your Holy Spirit to preach the word of Christ and to do so in a way that unashamedly holds forth the gospel of truth.

We pray that you'd bless our seminary. We ask, Lord, for the regular teaching that takes place there from week to week. And as they anticipate a new session, we pray for all those who prepare themselves to teach, those who come to be educated there.

We ask for all the lecturers. We pray that they will know of your own blessing accompanying their efforts. We pray for the principal, Principal Martin, and all who serve with him in that capacity.

And we pray, gracious one, that they may know of your constant provision for them and of your encouragement of them in such an important work. And we pray for all the church plants that we know of throughout our denomination.

And we ask, O God, that you would encourage them also. We pray that they may be further established in the truth, in your ways, that they will be encouraged as they seek to reach out with the gospel, that you would help them, Lord, to know of your blessing, building them up, not only in

terms of numbers, but spiritually as well.

[12 : 32] And we pray that we may see days, Lord, of much rejoicing yet and seeing many coming to the Lord through the efforts of those who are engaged both in church plants and in long-established congregations like our own.

Lord, our longing is that we will know that sound of heaven, that wonderful sound of your Spirit at work, the great sound of people coming to attend to your truth and coming to be changed in their lives under it.

We ask that you would bless tonight those two who have particular problems in life. And we pray for those who face addiction and seek from day to day to live with such difficulties and challenges in life as this provides for them.

We pray for those, Lord, who seek to help them. We pray for David Chisholm, and all others like him, Lord, or in our own local road to recovery. We ask that you would bless him and bless all who assist him in the work and bless all who come together from time to time to seek to discuss and to help each other through these difficult times.

And we pray that especially your Word might truly be blessed to them. We pray that you would bless the work of safe families. Again, we commend them to you and ask, Lord, that you would continue to provide for them and encourage them.

[13 : 54] We pray for all the families already being helped, and we ask, O God, that that would multiply and that there may be many more who will come to offer themselves as volunteers to help Catherine and all others and the staff of safe families.

We ask, Lord, that your blessing will continue to be with them and encourage them and strengthen them, Lord, to carry through with the important work that they're involved with.

Remember those also in our community who help us in various ways. We ask for all in the hospital, in the hospice, in our care homes. We pray for them and ask that they may know your blessing too as they minister to the needs of others so faithfully each and every day.

We do commit to you, Lord, those who teach in our schools, both in the state schools and in the Christian school. Remember them all, we pray. We pray, give to those, Lord, who teach our young people that they may be able to do so, seeking that wholesome teaching that comes through your word may itself be conveyed to the children.

We pray that you bless headteachers throughout our own islands and that they may, in facing the challenges of our age, that they may know that wisdom from the Lord himself.

[15 : 15] And we commit them to you and ask that you would strengthen them in mind and in their thoughts and in their actions to face the difficulties and challenges that they face particularly.

Remember now, we pray, those who are in hospital, those who are ill, those who are being cared for by others at home, remember the carers in our community. We thank you for them and pray that you would continue to bless them and bless also the social work department.

We pray for them and for all who help in these ways in our community. We ask, O Lord, too, for those who are tonight bereaved, those who mourn over the passing of loved ones.

We pray, too, for the undertaker and for all his staff. We commit them to you and give thanks for their dedication to their work. And Lord, in all of these areas of our land locally and nationally, we pray that you would continue to provide for us.

We pray that we may continue to depend upon you, realizing that it is in your goodness that all of these things are extended to us and provided for us. Bless us now, then, we pray, as we continue here in your presence.

[16 : 27] Bless all the gatherings of your people throughout our local districts, throughout our nation, throughout the whole world. Bless your people. Bless those of them especially facing persecution, poverty, deprivation, attacks of various kinds.

Lord, our God, we pray that your kingdom will nevertheless advance, that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And we ask that all of these things, Lord, as we present them before you, may be pleasing to you to answer our prayer.

We ask it all with the pardon of our sin. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Now we're going to sing further to God's praise from the Scottish Psalter this time, Psalm 90, and verses 13 to 17.

That's on page 350. The tune this time is Kilmarnock. Turn yet again to us, O Lord, how long thus shall it be?

Let it repent thee now for those that servants are to thee. With thy tender mercies, Lord, us early satisfy. So we rejoice, shall all our days, and still be glad in thee.

[17 : 42] The psalmist, in his prayer, appealing to the Lord to come and reveal his power once again as he seeks to appeal to God here to let the beauty of the Lord, our God, be us upon and for him to establish the handiworks, the works that they do in the Lord's name in the psalmist's own time.

And this, of course, is our prayer as well in our day, that the work and the power of God may appear to us as his servants and show unto our children, dear, his glory evermore.

So to the tune Kilmarnock, verses 13 to 17, to God's praise. Amen. Turn yet again to us, O Lord, how long thou shall live be.

Let it repent thee now for those that surrounds are to thee.

O with thy tender mercies, O Lord, God certainly satisfied, so we rejoice shall o'er our days and still be glad in thee.

[19 : 34] ■■■■ according us the days of thee CBD whey whey reap the ground large on years when When we ill have seen, so do thou make us now.

O let thy work and power appear, thy servant's face befall, and show fun to their children dear, thy glory evermore.

And let the beauty of the Lord our Lord be as the whole.

Our heavenly words each love, each love, each love, each love, each love, each love, each love, each love.

Let's turn now to read God's word in the first book of Samuel, chapter 5. 1 Samuel, chapter 5, that should be around page 275 in your pew Bibles if you're using the church pew Bibles.

[21 : 47] So it's 1 Samuel, chapter 5, and we're going to read from the beginning through to the end of the chapter. When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon.

And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face down on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place.

But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face down on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold.

Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both in Ashdod and in its territory.

[23 : 00] And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our God.

So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel? They answered, Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought round to Gath.

So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there. But after they had brought it round, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic. And he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them.

So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, They have brought round to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people. They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and said, Send away the ark of the God of Israel and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.

[24 : 08] For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

And may God bless to us reading this part of his word. Before we turn to this passage, let's sing again. We're singing from Psalm 115.

Psalm 115 and sing Psalms, page 152. Singing verses 1 to 9 to the tune Tiverton. A psalm which compares and contrasts the idols of pagan nations with the Lord, the God of Israel.

And so that, of course, fits in with the passage we've just read, and we're going to look at it later just in a few moments. Lord, not to us, O not to us, but to your name be the praise, because your love and faithfulness endure, O Lord, always.

Why do the nations question us? Where is their God, they say? Our God inhabits heaven high and over all holds sway. Their gold and silver images are crafted carefully, but they have mouths which cannot speak and eyes which cannot see.

[25 : 32] Their noses have no sense of smell. Their ears can hear no sound. They have no feeling in their hands, nor can they walk around. Although these idols do have throats, no word can they proclaim.

Their makers and their worshippers will all become like them. And so on down as far as verse 9. Lord, not to us, O not to us.

Amen. Lord, not to us, O not to us.

To your name be the praise. Because you love unfaithfulness, and you rule our whole way.

Why do the nations question us? Where is their God, they say?

[26 : 43] Our God inhabits heaven high and over all holds sway.

Their gold and silver images are crafted carefully.

But they have mouths which cannot speak. But they have mouths which cannot speak, and eyes which cannot see.

Their noses have no sense of smell. Their noses have no sense of smell. Their ears can hear no sound.

They have no feeling in their hands, nor can they walk around.

[28 : 01] Although these idols do have throats, no word can they proclaim.

Their makers and their worshippers will all become like them.

O in service will bless your trust upon the Lord alone.

He is almighty help and shield of all who are his own.

O in service will be the Lord alone. O in service will be the Lord. O in service will be the Lord. Well, please turn with me now to 1 Samuel chapter 5. We're going to look at the main points in this chapter that we've read through.

[29 : 16] 1 Samuel chapter 5, which tells us about the incident where the Philistines, having captured the ark of Israel, the ark of the Lord, experienced the consequences of that as described in the chapter.

1 Samuel chapter 5, which tells us about the fact that the human heart is a factory of idols.

The human heart is a factory of idols. That is where the production of idolatry always takes place. But what is an idol?

And what defines idolatry? As we'll see, it's a lot more than just carving a little figure or a large figure, such as these Philistines had in their god Ekron, in their god Dagon, and setting him in a particular place that they regarded as sacred.

An idol is whatever is given the devotion that's due to God alone. An idol is anything that is given the devotion that is due to God alone.

[30 : 34] It can be an object such as it was here for the Philistines or other objects like that. It can be people. It can be people. It can be wealth.

It can be work. It can be ideologies. A whole host of idols can be fashioned in the human heart and given the devotion that is due to God alone.

And that is why all the way through Scripture you find severe denunciation by God of idolatry. One of the things that he constantly set before the people of Israel was the need to avoid idolatry, the need to have no other gods but him, and to avoid being sucked into the idolatry of the nations around them.

As they moved through the desert and as they settled in Canaan, again and again the Lord emphasized that they needed to beware of idolatry, because idolatry was a direct challenge to God, a direct replacement for God.

And even though at times later on, as you find in the times of the prophets, the Isaiah, Jeremiah, smaller prophets, many of these refer to the idolatrous ways of Israel.

[31 : 55] And it was the idolatry of Israel that actually led ultimately to their exile in Babylon for those 70 years. They had repeatedly refused to receive the message that God sent through the prophets, the warnings that he had sent.

They didn't actually think that that was worthy of being followed up by themselves. So what happened was, just as God himself had specified, they were taken under the yoke, the power of the Babylonians, who ravaged their temple, took many of the objects there captive to Babylon, and actually had to live there for the 70 years until they began then to come back to Jerusalem. So the production of idolatry is in our own human hearts. And whatever it is we place instead of God or alongside of God and give the devotion that's due to God, then we're engaging in idolatry in doing that.

And it all comes, therefore, from our own fallen self. Remember that Jesus more than once said, if we were to follow him, if anyone was to follow him, one of the central features of that, one of the necessities of that, one of the indispensable aspects of following Jesus, let him deny himself.

Because denying yourself means turning against the inclination of your own sinful heart and giving your devotion to God instead. If you were to ask tonight, what is the oldest religion in the world?

[33 : 42] If I was to ask, what is the oldest religion in the world? Many people would answer different ways. Some people might say, well, surely it's something like Buddhism, or perhaps even Hinduism, which goes back many, many generations, thousands, in fact, of years.

And would say, well, surely that's the oldest religion in the world. But it's not. The oldest religion in the world is the worship of self. Ever since man fell, he's been worshiping himself.

Setting himself out instead of God. Setting himself out in a way that's above God. Refusing the direction of God to turn to himself, to come back to him, and instead following his own way.

And we can see in this chapter tonight just how blind devotion to idols is. Whether it's a figure like this, or any of the other things I've mentioned, or adding to that list.

Whatever we give our devotion to blinds us to the reality of God, and if not completely, then certainly to the extent that we do not give God the place that is due to him.

[34 : 50] So all of this is contained, really, in this passage, especially verses 1 to 4. Let's look first of all at Israel's loss of the ark, which takes us back into the previous chapter.

And then we'll look at the ark among the Philistines. Some of the things chapter 5 describes happened when the ark was taken by the Philistines to the house of Dagon, their idol, their god.

Well, Israel's loss of the ark, you know, call yourselves that the ark was this box that was made of a special wood and then overlaid with gold. It was around a meter long, by half that again in width and in height.

And the Lord had specified in Exodus chapter 25 that this was to be a very important object in the ritual of Israel in terms of their worship of God.

The ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, in the tabernacle, in the temple afterwards. And it was associated especially with the presence of God.

[35 : 58] They were required to make a lid for the ark, which became known as the mercy seat, with the two cherubim carved of gold on the mercy seat facing each other.

And it was there that God met with his people. It was there that the presence of God was made known to the people. The cloud that dwelt between the cherubim on the top of the ark was itself an indication of the presence of God.

So from that you can see that as the ark represented the presence of God, it was absolutely central to the ritual that God himself had specified that represented that cleansing from sin.

Chapter 16 of Leviticus talks about the day of atonement that took place once a year, where the high priest who alone was allowed to go into the Holy of Holies, took the blood of the goat that was killed for a sacrifice, and sprinkled that over the mercy seat and in the presence or in the front of the mercy seat.

It was very central to the whole ritual of atonement in Israel, to teach them that God's presence, in the way that it was represented there, that they could only live with God's presence by following the directions of God himself, by providing propitiatory blood, which of course itself is symbolic of the death of Jesus.

[37 : 25] But they went out in chapter 4 here. You can see what had happened, chapter 4 and verse 2, if you just cast your mind back, and we'll read a few verses there.

The Philistines, here they were coming to battle against the people of Israel. The Philistines threw up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about 4,000 men on the field of battle.

And when the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? That's an interesting way of putting it, wasn't it?

They were seeking to cast the blame upon God and not upon themselves. Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.

So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. What are they doing?

[38 : 29] What kind of thinking is this? What has become of these people? Well, what they're doing is treating this ark in a sense as if it were God. They know that it represents God.

They know that, strictly speaking, it is not, of course, God. It's not like the idol of the Philistines. But they're treating it as such. They're looking on it superstitiously or looking at it as some kind of miraculous operation, that if they carry this ark into battle, then they're bound to be successful against the people that are fighting against them.

They've become superstitious. They've become a people who have just lost sight for a moment of what the ark represented. And they regarded it as if it were God himself, as if the ark, just carrying the ark in itself, was going to guarantee them victory against the Philistines.

Israel lost the ark because they lost what it represented. They lost sight of what it represented. And therefore, it was taken captive by the Lord just to, as it were, remind them that their trust must not be in the ark because the ark was a representation of God.

It wasn't to be treated like the idols of the Philistines. Now, we can do the same with some of the privileges that we have.

[39 : 54] And it's altogether too easy to fall into the same mindset as Israel here, who said, let's bring the ark, take the ark of the covenant of the Lord, that it may come amongst us.

It'll save us from the power of our enemies. You can become that way minded even about the likes of your baptism or taking communion in the Lord's Supper, where the things themselves become, although the representations of God, they become, as it were, looked at magically or superstitiously or looked at in such a way that would say, for example, well, I was baptized as a child, so if you ask me, well, what's my relationship with God?

I'm bound to be saved because I was baptized. There were promises taken about me. There are prayers about my future. Same thing with taking communion.

People can actually come and say about taking communion, that makes me a Christian. That guarantees my salvation. None of that, of course, is true.

It can be just like the ark was for Israel, that we just trust in the possession of them, trust in the history that's brought them to us, trust in perhaps the ritual that's involved in baptism or in taking communion and thinking that just from the mere possession of it, from the mere act of it, that that guarantees our acceptance with God.

[41 : 25] And it doesn't. Unless we have what's represented there, then we cannot be saved. We cannot be in a right relation with God just by taking communion. Communion itself is an indication that you have that relationship with God already.

And the same is true when you come to think of baptism too, that that is something that represents being connected to Christ, being united to Christ.

So here is something that's important for us to remember from this Old Testament passage. If you go back to Romans, or forward to Romans chapter 2 and verses 28 and 29, this is how Paul put it. Because he was dealing, of course, with people like himself who were Jews by birth and who, just like the Pharisees, as we saw this morning, were placing great emphasis on the fact that this is how they were brought up.

This was their privilege. This is what God gave them to be. They gave them to be Jews in contrast to the Gentiles and the rest of the world. And here were the people that Paul was writing to in the letter to the Romans actually thinking that because this was the case with them, in terms of their ancestry and their privileges over the years, that they themselves were already right with God, automatically, as it were.

[42 : 46] Well, here is what Paul said. No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. I didn't mean, of course, by that, that circumcision had stopped to be something physical that was applied to Jewish young boys when they were actually circumcised.

That still was the case at eight days of age. But now he's saying, a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the Spirit and not by the letter.

His praise is not from man, but of God. In other words, he was saying to those, he was writing to them in Romans, reminding them that being circumcised did not of itself, though it was an advantage, it didn't of itself convey any grace.

It didn't convey any salvation. It was an outward symbol of something that needed to be inward. Circumcision of the heart. And it's really the same with ourselves.

That's why the Lord said to Nicodemus, who had come to him by night, and he was quite sure that he himself being one of the doctors of the law in those days, one member of a Sanhedrin, he would never have questioned whether or not he was within the kingdom of God.

[44 : 07] And Jesus, of course, brought him up short and said, except a man be born again, born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

So here is something that comes across all of these generations tonight to actually teach us about the need for a proper spiritual heart relationship with Christ, with God in Christ, and not to rely on anything which may be in itself a great advantage to us, but not to rely upon it in itself.

We need to come to the Lord. We need to receive the Lord. We need to accept the Lord. We need to depend on the Lord. We need to have our trust in the Lord. We need to make sure that He is the foundation, not any ritual that's associated with Him.

This is why Israel lost the ark, because they lost what it represented. But secondly, look at the ark among the Philistines. What did the Philistines do with the ark?

Well, chapter 5 now, when they captured the ark, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod, and the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it up beside Dagon.

[45 : 23] See, they saw this ark as being a god to Israel, just like Dagon was to them. So, it was a trophy of war in many respects, but to the people of the Philistines, they were actually saying, we've actually managed to capture one of the gods of Israel.

Because when you go back again to chapter 4 and verse 6, notice what it's saying there. When the Philistines heard the noise, when the ark actually did come into the camp, Israel gave a mighty shout so that the earth resounded.

And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, what does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean? And when they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, a God has come into the camp.

And they said, woe to us, for nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us. Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness.

Take courage and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves. To the Hebrews, as they have been to you, be men and fight.

[46 : 34] They regarded the ark as a god of Israel. That's why they brought it into the house of their god, Dagon. And what happened?

Well, you read down through there, when they rose early the next day, Dagon had fallen face down on the ground before the ark of the Lord.

And the passage is really telling us by that, and the passage telling the people of Israel by that, as they would read that later, telling them, or even from that moment that they realized this had happened, telling them that God, their God, was the true God, was the only God.

Because here is Dagon. And you notice it's interesting here, this fall of Dagon was not done by human hands, this happened overnight. Nobody went into the place, took Dagon down and put him on the ground beside or in front of the ark of God.

This was something that happened miraculously. God himself had brought it about. But you notice the difference in the language. Just look carefully how the language says, when they brought the ark into the house of God, they set it up beside Dagon.

[47 : 52] And then when Dagon fell, he fell to the ground before the ark of the Lord. You see, they had put Dagon, this statue, this idol, they had put it beside the ark of the Lord.

And when he fell, it's no longer beside the ark of the Lord, he's in the presence of the ark of the Lord. He's bowing down to the ark of the Lord, as it were, showing the supremacy of the God that the Israelites worshipped.

And so, the sovereignty of God. Here is Dagon in a position of homage and subservience and obedience and acknowledgement of the superiority of God because Dagon is here before the ark of God as if he were bowed down and worshipped to him.

See, language makes a difference. And you can see that this is the message conveyed by that change. It's no longer beside Dagon, no longer beside the ark, he is before the ark.

He's fallen down in the presence of what represents the God of Israel. And that, of course, is true of all idolatry and all idols.

[49 : 04] Even if they're placed on the same level as God. Even if they're just taken in, as it were, into a pantheon of gods. Nevertheless, the Bible assures us and tells us again and again that there is no equality with God.

That none can actually come to the level at which our God is placed as our creator and as the saviour of his people. That's why Psalm 115, as we sang, is so graphic and so powerful in the description of the contrast between God and all idols.

He is God. He is a lone God. And it doesn't matter tonight what people worship. I don't say it doesn't matter in the sense of it's not important.

Of course, it's important, but it doesn't change this, that God remains God and God remains alone God.

He remains the unique creator and saviour of his people. So, what do the Philistines do? Well, you might think that they would say now that our idol is prostrate in the presence of the ark, you might think, well, surely any right thinking would say, well, this ark must be superior to our God.

[50 : 27] Let's actually now give ourselves to the ark of God or to the God of Israel instead of to our Dagon because our Dagon has fallen in his presence. That's not what they do.

What do they do? They pick him up. They set him back on his feet again. They came and put Dagon back in his place.

You know, the Lord doesn't mind a touch of humour in his word. It's not comedy. It's not that sort of thing. But there is a touch of humour there, isn't there?

Because how can a God help anybody if he needs to be helped to his feet? How can any object that's given devotion that rightly belongs to God be of any use to any human being if these humans themselves have to help him back on his feet, have to help put him back in his place?

You see, the foolishness and the blindness of the idolatry of the Philistines as they're doing this, whether they realise it or not, what they're saying is this is a useless God. We can't possibly go on worshipping this God.

[51 : 37] He needs to be helped to his feet. And we humans who have created him as our God, we should look at ourselves and think, how can this be any help to us at all to trust and to worship to be devoted to this Dagon?

Of course, they're blinded by their paganism, blinded by their idolatry. Yet that's our instinct as well. Is this not something that just you leave in history back in the days of the Philistines? What do we do when our gods fail?

Whatever God it is other than our God himself. What do we do when we find our gods not actually helping us but being a hindrance at times to us?

Do we just instantly leave them? Of course we don't. We sometimes just put them back in place. And in our own generation and our own day especially this is exactly what you're seeing.

[52 : 43] Because the powers of the world and of worldliness and the powers that are against the gospel the ungodly powers of the present day are in a sense the equivalent of the Philistines.

What are they trying to do? They're trying to actually take what is essential to our Christian faith and to take it captive and to put it in the house of Dagon as it were. Their aim is to nullify the Christian faith if it were possible to deprive us of its arc of its most central basic foundational features.

That's why you find that the Christian faith so often nowadays sadly is placed alongside other so-called faiths as if they're really on the same level as if the combination of them really is a much better way towards ensuring your eternity than just worshipping the one true God.

And what happens when the gods of secularism the gods of worldliness the thinking of these gods what happens when they are demonstrably failed?

They're picked up. They're put in another form perhaps but they're not abandoned. I know the approach of governments today and our own government is certainly one of the governments in this category that approaches human problems of behavior social problems not from a biblical

perspective not from a spiritual perspective but from the perspective of human wisdom.

[54 : 25] The human wisdom that largely that largely comprises a liberty of behavior that lumps all of that behavior together and says you know the more liberty you have the more people will be educated.

The more people will come to realize what's necessary and what isn't in human life and in human progress that is nonsense. if you look at the statistics take for example even sexually transmitted diseases in Scotland just last month the last statistics showed that there's been an increase not a decrease.

Why is that? Because the wisdom of the world cannot actually deal with the problem.

Permissiveness does not deal with the problem. Opening things out so that everybody does what's right in their own eyes does not solve the problem it makes it worse.

And it doesn't matter how you tinker with that how you adjust that how much you put Dagon back on his shelf maybe in a different form you're still ending up with the same problem.

There's nothing there that can supply what meets our human need. And it's at the moment such a sad sad thing that our governments throughout the western world are capitulating to the ideology of Dagon you might say capitulating to the idea that really if we just all get together and use our human wisdom then we'll solve the problems.

[55 : 58] Throw some more money at it. Do it in a different way. There is only one power that can solve and deal with our human problems and that's the power of Christ the power of God the power that has already dealt with sin and with evil in the person of Jesus Christ.

And I have to say also that sadly one of the powers that or the influences assisting the increase in this dreadful human wisdom approach to the problems of human beings one of the main assistances comes from the church itself from the church itself as you look at it in our day Christianizing ungodliness you can call it Christian this and Christian that but if it's ungodly then it's ungodly and if it's ungodly it's of no use to actually solve our human problems.

Indeed what you find sadly all too often is the reverse of what you see there in verse 2b they took the ark of God and they took it into the house of Dagon and they set it up beside Dagon let's just reverse that in your thinking that's bad enough because of what it represents but when you're seeing what you're seeing in our day sadly is nothing less than Dagon being taken into the house of God and that is such a serious matter that it has to be spoken about for what it is because when Dagon comes into the house of God when human wisdom replaces the gospel in its essence in its power what you're left with is just a mess what you're left with is just despondency what you're left with is something that has no power whatsoever to fix our human hearts so here is the fall of Dagon but here is something that we can learn from because you and I who believe in the gospel who believe the gospel is the power of God and to salvation as Paul wrote to the Romans to everyone who believes whether it's

Jew or Gentile whatever the problems human beings have that's why our concern is to bring the power of the gospel to bear upon human lives young and old whatever backgrounds whatever way they're wasting their lives presently whatever addictions they may have whatever things may characterize their life at the moment this is what God has given us and it is your duty and my duty together and individually to seek to convey this to the world as we sang in the psalm tell every land that the Lord is king tell them about Jesus why did Jesus come who was he what did he do where is he now why do you love him why do you serve him what is he to you what is he to you what is he to you what is he to you what is he to you it's all part of our witness to Christ in the world a world in which the daggone of the day is so powerful thankfully God is above all that and this is the God we pray to the God we worship the God we love and of course what happened then was that the daggone again fell down the next morning the head of daggone and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold significant details you see because what that is really saying to us is the head does it represent the intellect or the ideology of Philistinism and the hands which represent the practicality the activity of that idolatry what happens they've been severed from the trunk of this idol he's lying there useless and it's being demonstrated there quite categorically that neither in terms of intellect or ideology or practicality is there any use in idolatry and so you're back to Jesus and the gospel the power for our mind and for our action well you know sadly as you very well know in our own day despite the efforts of the church those in the church faithful to God or those denominations people in all denominations faithful to God despite their attempts and appeals to those in government to those in authority to those with influence it's really a bit like what you find here with

the ark in the Philistines and they realize that they can't hold on to this ark without it being a means of further destruction amongst them what do they do they send it on to another place and that place says no we're not having it let's move it on to Gath and to Ashdod to all of these other places in the region of the Philistines and that's what people do with the gospel they don't want it they move it on let it go somewhere else but don't leave it here it's dangerous it doesn't fit with our modern secular thinking so we can't have it it's not for us instead of turning to God instead of saying our secular unbelieving ungodly philosophy has failed us and saying let's turn to God let's turn to what these Christians are saying let's get back to what was the case in our land so long ago when the power of the gospel made such great inroads into people's lives when you go back into not only the reformers but some of the great philanthropists that were in the free church itself back in the 1800s why was Thomas Guthrie so successful as he headed up the ragged school movement why was the church of the time so successful in actually locating and dealing with people in the terrible conditions in which they lived in these closest in Edinburgh or Glasgow wherever because the power of the gospel was let loose amongst them because people like Guthrie and Chalmers and others believed the word of God and didn't adjust the word of God to suit the thinking of the age but we're convinced that this is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes but let me ask a final question what about yourself what about yourself and myself on what are we basing our hopes is it just belonging to the church is it having been brought up in Stornoway Free Church or wherever hopefully not surely it is in Christ and having your trust in him and having received him as your own personal saviour as you look around you at all the philosophies and ideologies of the age and all the horrible things that you see and the debauched behaviour that you see all around you what do you say

[63 : 56] Lord as the Lord says well will you go with them are you going to join them as well are you going to approve of that aren't you like Peter John 6 where he says Lord to whom shall we go you alone have the words of eternal life may God bless these thoughts to us we're going to conclude now by singing to God's praise in Psalm Psalm number 97 that's on page 128 Psalm 97 verses 7 to 12 the tune is Warrington all those who worship images are put to everlasting shame their worthless idols are their boast you gods bow down before his name to Zion hill and Judah's towns your judgments Lord great joy supply above the earth and all the gods exalted is the Lord most high and of course we too remember those who are evangelizing amongst the religions of the world the great world religions that are themselves given to such measures of idolatry and to remember them as they carry the gospel to them so these words verses 7 to 12

Psalm 97 all those who worship images are put to ever in shame their worthless idols are their foes new God how dumb he put his name to Zion hill and Judah's hands your judgments heart rejoice the fire above the earth and all the gods exalted is the Lord most high he his evil youth who love the Lord his faithful ones he will defend and from the hands of wicked men to them deliverance he will save upon the righteous light will shine and joy all those of our right wings your righteousness will the Lord rejoice and to his holy name give praise

I'll go to the side door to my right here after the benediction now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore Amen