

When Idols Tug at Your Heart  
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Ezekiel Chapters 8 & 14

A “refresher” on the book of Ezekiel:

- Ezekiel was among the exiles taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. This was the second group taken from Judah to Babylonian captivity. Daniel was in that first smaller group.
- Ezekiel was a priest who God called to be a prophet to the exiles.
- Ezekiel saw unusual visions: *“God moving around in a chariot-throne—with wheels that go in all directions and are full of eyes. A valley full of dry bones—which collect into skeletons, develop bodies and become a mighty army!”* (The Bible Guide)
- Ezekiel acted out his prophesies in weird ways: Making a scale model of Jerusalem under siege. Lying on his left side 390 days and his right side 40 days. Shaving his hair off and burning, chopping, and blowing it away.
- Some shy away from studying this book because of all the strange imagery. But Ezekiel was included in the canon of scripture because there are very important lessons for us in this book.
- Ezekiel is a message of JUDGMENT: These people of God, were in captivity because they had TURNED from God. There is a price to be paid when God’s people turn away from Him.
- But, Ezekiel is also a message of RESTORATION: The Lord would eventually restore His people to the land and reestablish pure worship in a new temple.

Ezekiel 36:24–26 (ESV) Gives us God’s promise to His people THEN and TODAY:

24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

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Here’s the BIG IDEA: It’s human nature to put SOMETHING on a THRONE or a PEDESTAL.  
The question is who or what is on the THRONE in our lives?

It’s been fourteen months since Ezekiel was called to be a prophet. He’s sitting in his house with some of the elders of Judah when suddenly the hand of God grabbed him by the hair of his head and transported him to Jerusalem in a vision. Let’s begin in verse three of chapter eight.

Ezekiel 8:3–18 (ESV)

3 He put out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy.

4 And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the valley.

5 Then he said to me, “Son of man, lift up your eyes now toward the north.” So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy. 6 And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations.”

7 And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall. 8 Then he said to me, “Son of man, dig in the wall.” So I dug in the wall, and behold,

there was an entrance. 9 And he said to me, “Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.” 10 So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. 11 And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. 12 Then he said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, ‘The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.’” 13 He said also to me, “You will see still greater abominations that they commit.” 14 Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. (A pagan fertility god) 15 Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these.” 16 And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east. 17 Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose. 18 Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.”

- **What are these verses describing?**

- Verse three: Ezekiel sees what he calls “the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy.” **Any idea what that is? What does the NIV call it? Where is it placed?**
- **Whom does it provoke to jealousy? Isn’t jealousy bad? How is this jealousy different?**

Warren Wiersbe writes:

*“God is a “jealous God,” not in the sense that He’s envious of other gods, for He knows that all other “gods” are figments of the imagination and don’t really exist. The word “jealous” expresses His love for His people because He wants the very best for them. Just as parents are jealous over their children and spouses over their mates, so God is jealous over His beloved ones and will not tolerate competition (Zech. 1:14; 8:2).”*

- **In verses 11-13 Ezekiel goes inside the temple and who did he find in there?**

- **What were they doing? What does verse 12 say they believed about God?**

- Picture this, they had placed a statue of a false god...an idol at the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem. Imagine Ezekiel’s ALARM. How would you feel if you pulled up to church this morning and there were statues of Buddha at the entrances!
- Then imagine if you went inside the church and the deacons and the staff were burning incense to 70 false gods! Imagine you asked them: *“What on earth are you doing?”* and they replied: *“God’s clearly forsaken us so we’re trying some other gods. He won’t even know we’re doing it.”* This is what Ezekiel saw in this vision.
- Verse six says: *6 And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary?”*
- **Why would having this idol in the temple courts have driven God far from His temple?**

Isaiah 42:8 (ESV)

8 I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols

- God didn't abandon the people. We know he eventually restored them. But his GLORY DID leave the temple. God will not share his glory with idols.
- Idolatry wasn't just happening back in Jerusalem. It was taking place there in the captivity where Ezekiel was prophesying.
- It was taking place among the most prominent leaders of the captives.
- This time the idols were not in the physical temple...but the temple of the heart.

Ezekiel 14:1–5 (ESV)

Idolatrous Elders Condemned

14 Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. 2 And the word of the Lord came to me: 3 "Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? 4 Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Any one 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 the multitude of his idols, 5 that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, who are all estranged from me through their idols.

- Translation: *"Don't think you can serve idols and come to the preacher for God's blessing!"*
- The NLT tells us God said to Ezekiel, tell them...
- 3 *"Son of man, these leaders have set up idols\* in their hearts. They have embraced things that will make them fall into sin. Why should I listen to their requests?"*
- Don't fool yourself by serving idols during the week and think you can come get God's blessing at church on Sunday!
- Let's talk about IDOLATRY in Old Testament times.
- **When those people prayed to images and statues of birds, and bugs, and weird beings, what were they counting on those idols to do for them?**
- **Look at Exodus chapter 20:3-6, how do we know that IDOLATRY is a BIG DEAL to God?**

Exodus 20:3–6 (ESV)

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

- Two of the ten commandments (20%) command us NOT to worship idols.
- In some countries today they still bow down to pictures and statues. We wouldn't do that, would we? We wouldn't put our trust in something other than God, right?
- **How could a follower of Christ be in danger of IDOLATRY? What are some examples of modern day idols?**
- **So, what would be a good "working" definition of IDOLATRY in our day?**

The Bible teaches that idolatry is putting anyone or anything in place of the one true God—and it is primarily a matter of the heart. The reality is even believers in Christ can slip into idolatry and not recognize what's happening. Today's lesson is a warning: I can NEVER let anything take God's place in my life.

Billy Graham writes:

*The Bible gives us two important warnings about idols (whatever form they take). First, it warns us that they are false; only God can meet our deepest moral and spiritual needs. Second, it warns us that nothing should take God's place in our lives. The Bible says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything" (Exodus 20:4). Are there any idols in your life – things that you have allowed to take God's rightful place? Face them ... repent of them ... and then make Christ alone the center of your life.*

- So, how do you spot an IDOL? I thought of three words:
- FIRST, MOST, and ALWAYS. Here's what I mean...
  - Whenever something is really good or really bad where do your thoughts go FIRST?
  - "I just got raise! Now I can buy that boat!"
  - Or is it, "Lord, THANK YOU for that raise...I know YOU are the source!"
  - Perhaps it's "Thank you Lord, now I can buy that boat!"
  - Same thing with something bad. "This is terrible, how will I get MYSELF out of this fix?" "I'll call my wife, mother, lawyer, banker, fill in the blank."
  - Or is it, "Lord, I'm turning to you FIRST because ONLY YOU can fix my problem!"
  - The point is, there is only ONE FIRST PLACE.
  - You only get a Super Bowl ring for FIRST PLACE. You only go to NASCAR's victory circle for being in FIRST PLACE. You only have eternal life by putting Christ in FIRST PLACE.
  - As we've just seen, God doesn't SHARE FIRST PLACE.
  - Whatever is in the "winners circle" of our lives is what we worship.
- Then there's the word MOST...
  - Whoever or whatever gets the most of my time; most of my money; the most of my attention?
  - Whoever or whatever get's the MOST of me is where I'm worshipping.
- Then the word, ALWAYS
  - We don't have any problem with ALWAYS in most things in life.
  - I will ALWAYS be a fan of...fill in your favorite sports team; kind of music; whatever.
  - I will ALWAYS vote...fill in the political party or ideology you're passionate about.
  - Idolatry is present when God isn't in the ALWAYS column.
  - Serving God is not designed to be a SOMETIMES proposition...it's an ALWAYS proposition.
  - Putting God in FIRST PLACE is not meant to be seasonal, it's meant to be ETERNAL.
- So, What's the Takeaway?
- Simple: FIRST, MOST, and ALWAYS.
- What or who is FIRST in my life? What or who gets the MOST of my life?
- Is God ALWAYS, FIRST and MOST?
- If I ask God to reveal my heart and find He's not, look at chapter 14 verse six.
- Back to those elders who were serving idols in their hearts but came to Ezekiel for a word from God. God DID give them a word. It's the same one He gives to anyone who had set up an idol in their lives:

14:6 "...Thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations.

- FIRST, MOST, and ALWAYS should belong to the ONE TRUE GOD.