

## STUDY 9

# Foolishness and Idolatry

*Martin Bleby*

### A DELUDED MIND

The classic exposé of the foolishness of idolatry is in Isaiah 44:

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame. Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good? Look, all its devotees shall be put to shame; the artisans too are merely human. Let them all assemble, let them stand up; they shall be terrified, they shall all be put to shame.

The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!' The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, 'Save me, for you are my god!'

They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, 'Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?' He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?' (Isa. 44:9–20).<sup>1</sup>

Idols and those who make them are castigated as empty nothings incapable of accomplishing anything. The bizarre irrationality of a frail human being constructing and then worshipping an idol, all the while oblivious to the One who is supplying all his materials, is meticulously documented. The incongruity of using the same material for both idol manufacture and humble home service is highlighted. The judgement of terror and shame on all idolaters is decreed.

In particular, the intractable deception and delusion of idol worship is derided:

... a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud? [RSV: Is there not a lie in my right hand?]'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

Paul the apostle uses almost identical language in his summary of the descent into idolatry:

... those who by their wickedness suppress the truth ... though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles ... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Rom. 1:18, 21–23, 25).

Paul here is saying nothing other than had already been said in the Old Testament:

They exchanged the glory of God  
for the image of an ox that eats grass (Ps. 106:20).

Has a nation changed its gods,  
even though they are no gods?  
But my people have changed their glory  
for something that does not profit (Jer. 2:11).

... they changed their glory into shame (Hosea 4:7).

We note here that, for human beings made in the image of God, the abandonment of the glory of God entails the loss of their own glory.

People in churches can become fixated upon the works of their own hands—from church fetes to elaborately adorned buildings—at the expense of the glory of God, and can see nothing contradictory about this at all.

### **NOT JUST SILLY BUT DANGEROUS**

Not all the idols we worship are of our own making. Often we simply take up the idols of others, according to what is in fashion at the time. Ian Pennicook writes: ‘the adopting of the images of others always results in the internalising of the foolishness of those others, so that their gods become our gods and our bondage deeper and more ugly’.<sup>2</sup> This can be traced in the decline and fall of Ahaz, king of Judah (735–715 BC).

Early in his reign, Ahaz suffered defeat at the hands of Rezin king of Aram (Syria) and Pekah son of Remaliah, king of the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim). Among those killed were Ahaz’s own son, Ahaz’s palace commander, and Ahaz’s second-in-command. Ahaz was under further pressure from the Philistines to the south, where they took and occupied a number of cities and villages, and from the Edomites, who recaptured one of their cities in the south-east. Ahaz also experienced the remarkable happening, under the hand of God, of the safe return of two hundred thousand captives, clothed and fed and well-looked-after, by the Ephraimite troops (see 2 Chron. 28:5–19; 2 Kings 16:6).

The northern coalition mounted a siege against Jerusalem, at which ‘the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the

---

<sup>2</sup> Notes for speakers, 2008 Ministry School.

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

wind' (see 2 Kings 16:5; Isa. 7:1–2). At this point God sent a word to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah found Ahaz inspecting the city's water supply:

Then the LORD said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

It shall not stand,  
and it shall not come to pass.  
For the head of Aram is Damascus,  
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)<sup>3</sup>

The head of Ephraim is Samaria,  
and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.  
If you do not stand firm in faith,  
you shall not stand at all (Isa. 7:3–9).

Ahaz had good reason to be afraid, and these things were coming on him as a judgement from God (see 2 Chron. 28:19), but in the midst of this judgement God, faithful to His promises to the house of David, was showing mercy to Ahaz and was telling him to trust and be careful to do nothing (the literal meaning of 'be quiet'). Particularly not to do what was in Ahaz's heart: to enter into alliance with Assyria (see 2 Kings 16:7–9) against the spent forces of Syria and 'what's-his-name', the son of Remaliah of Israel.

So important was this that God told Ahaz: 'Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven'. Ahaz piously refused to 'put the Lord to the test' (Isa. 7:11–12). In that moment Ahaz made the fatal decision that would subject the hitherto free people of Judah to foreign domination—down to the present day:

At that time King Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria for help . . . So King Tilgath-pilneser of Assyria came against him, and oppressed him instead of strengthening him. For Ahaz plundered the house of the LORD and the houses of the king and of the officials, and gave tribute to the king of Assyria; but it did not help him (2 Chron. 28:16, 20–21).

God through the prophet Isaiah gave Ahaz the sign he did not ask for: a prophecy that 'Immanuel' when he came would now, as a result of Ahaz's fatal decision, be born into a situation of oppression and poverty (see Isa. 7:13–25).

It seems it had always been in Ahaz's heart to 'get with the strength':

In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the LORD—this same King Ahaz. For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus, which had defeated him, and said, 'Because the gods of the kings of Aram helped them, I will sacrifice to them so that they may help me.' But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel. Ahaz gathered together the utensils of the house of God, and cut in pieces the utensils of the house of God. He shut up the doors of the house of the Lord and made himself altars in

---

<sup>3</sup> Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians and its inhabitants deported in 721 BC, and in 671 BC Esarhaddon, successor to Tiglath-pileser, brought foreign settlers into the area of the northern kingdom. From that time on, then, unlike Judah two hundred years later, any survivors of Israel would have no land they could call their own, and would be finished as a people—a very specific and accurate prediction.

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

every corner of Jerusalem. In every city of Judah he made high places to make offerings to other gods, provoking to anger the LORD, the God of his ancestors (2 Chron. 28:22–25).

Even when the king of Assyria had defeated Aram, Ahaz pursued his fascination with the gods of Damascus:

When King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus. King Ahaz sent to the priest Uriah a model of the altar, and its pattern, exact in all its details. The priest Uriah built the altar; in accordance with all that King Ahaz had sent from Damascus, just so did the priest Uriah build it, before King Ahaz arrived from Damascus. When the king came from Damascus, the king viewed the altar. Then the king drew near to the altar, went up on it, and offered his burnt offering and his grain offering, poured his drink offering, and dashed the blood of his offerings of well-being against the altar. The bronze altar that was before the LORD he removed from the front of the house, from the place between his altar and the house of the LORD, and put it on the north side of his altar. King Ahaz commanded the priest Uriah, saying, 'Upon the great altar offer the morning burnt offering, and the evening grain offering, and the king's burnt offering, and his grain offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, their grain offering, and their drink offering; then dash against it all the blood of the burnt offering, and all the blood of the sacrifice; but the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by.' The priest Uriah did everything that King Ahaz commanded (2 Kings 16:10–16).

The political alliance with Assyria also necessarily compromised the true worship of God:

Then King Ahaz cut off the frames of the stands, and removed the laver from them; he removed the sea from the bronze oxen that were under it, and put it on a pediment of stone. The covered portal for use on the sabbath that had been built inside the palace, and the outer entrance for the king he removed from the house of the LORD. He did this because of the king of Assyria (2 Kings 16:17–18).

Probably thinking that he was acting with freedom and initiative amongst the great wheelers and dealers, Ahaz ended up subjugated to whatever power was at hand. No doubt God gave him over to that, and Ahaz sank as low as any king of Israel. Not content with having lost one son in battle:

He even made cast images for the Baals; and he made offerings in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and made his sons pass through fire, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. He sacrificed and made offerings on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree (2 Chron. 28:2–4).

The decline and fall of Ahaz into the pits of idolatry is a compelling, and quite chilling, case study. What are its implications for us in the church today? To what extent are we, like Ahaz, eager to 'get with the strength', according to the most recent fad? What does that do to us, and to our children?

### **BELITTLING AND DEMEANING**

As human beings created in the image of God (see Gen. 1:26, 27; 5:1–3), and 'predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son' (Rom. 8:29), we are designed to become like that which we worship. If we worship something other and less than God, we will become like that thing, and so belittled, demeaned, degraded and debased from what we are meant to be:

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

Our God is in the heavens;  
he does whatever he pleases.  
Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak;  
eyes, but do not see.  
They have ears, but do not hear;  
noses, but do not smell.  
They have hands, but do not feel;  
feet, but do not walk;  
they make no sound in their throats (Ps. 115:3–7).

We may consider the verse that follows to be Israel's way of delivering a supercilious insult to their idolatrous enemies:

Those who make them are like them;  
so are all who trust in them (Ps. 115:8).

It simply states a truism that applied to Israel no less than to its enemies. Worship money, and you will become cold and hard and unfeeling like money; be dominated by your work, and you will become a very dull person; have an image of God that is aloof, judgemental or vindictive, and you will be the same; and so on. Idolatry in various ways renders us incapable of communicating, unable to see things for what they are or to hear rightly what others are saying, insensitive and unfeeling, and rooted to the spot.

## **IDOLS AND DEMONS**

It could be that when God chose Israel as His own possession, He relegated the other nations for the time being to the worship of other gods:

When the Most High apportioned the nations,  
when he divided humankind,  
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples  
according to the number of the gods;<sup>4</sup>  
the LORD's own portion was his people,  
Jacob his allotted share (Deut. 32:8–9).

We are told that later, 'They turned and served other gods, worshipping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them' (Deut. 29:26). When Israel gave allegiance to these other gods, it is indicated that they were aligning themselves with demonic powers:

Jacob ate his fill;  
Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked.  
You grew fat, bloated, and gorged!  
He abandoned God who made him,  
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Masoretic Text has 'according to the number of the Israelites', but this reading from a Qumran manuscript, supported by the Septuagint and Targum, seems to fit the sense.

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

They made him jealous with strange gods,  
with abhorrent things they provoked him.  
They sacrificed to demons, not God,  
to deities they had never known,  
to new ones recently arrived,  
whom your ancestors had not feared.  
You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;  
you forgot the God who gave you birth (Deut. 32:15–18).

This induced them to engage in practices demanded by the worship of these entities:

They sacrificed their sons  
and their daughters to the demons;  
they poured out innocent blood,  
the blood of their sons and daughters,  
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan;  
and the land was polluted with blood.  
Thus they became unclean by their acts,  
and prostituted themselves in their doings (Ps. 106:37–39).

Paul picks this up when writing to the Corinthians about their mixing of the worship of idols with their participation in Christ through the Lord's Supper:

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Cor. 10:14–22).

From time to time in churches we feel that we have tapped into something that is more than the presenting issue: perhaps we have sought to rearrange some church furniture and it is as if we have disturbed the ancestral spirits of the sacred site, and something has erupted from the pit of hell. That is when we know that 'our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places', for which we need 'the whole armor of God' (Eph. 6:12, 13; see Ministry School 2005, Study 19).

## **IDOLS AND SEXUALITY**

Paul traces sexual immorality and perversion as following on directly from idolatry (see Rom. 1:24–27, following 1:23). Certainly the fertility religions of Canaan tended this way:

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

to their gods. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel (Num. 25:1-3; warned against by Paul in 1 Cor. 10:8).

This carried over into Israel's occupation of the promised land:

. . . the men themselves go aside with whores,  
and sacrifice with temple prostitutes;  
thus a people without understanding comes to ruin . . .  
Ephraim is joined to idols . . .  
When their drinking is ended, they indulge in sexual orgies;  
they love lewdness more than their glory (Hosea 4:14, 17, 18).

If God sees His relationship with His people in terms of marriage (see Ezek. 16:4-8; Jer. 2:2; 31:32), it follows that the forsaking of a relationship with God amounts to marital unfaithfulness. In Proverbs, an adulteress is seen as one who 'forgets the covenant of her God' (Prov. 2:17, RSV). Idolatry in the Old Testament is characterised, as 'whoredom' or 'adultery':

My people consult a piece of wood,  
and their divining rod gives them oracles.  
For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,  
and they have played the whore, forsaking their God.  
They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains,  
and make offerings upon the hills,  
under oak, poplar, and terebinth,  
because their shade is good.  
Therefore your daughters play the whore,  
and your daughters-in-law commit adultery (Hosea 4:12-13).

Because she took her whoredom so lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree (Jer. 3:9).

I have seen your abominations,  
your adulteries and neighings, your shameless prostitutions  
on the hills of the countryside.  
Woe to you, O Jerusalem!  
How long will it be  
before you are made clean? (Jer. 13:27).

Our experiences of marriage breakdown may show that there is almost invariably some kind of idolatry involved where, for instance, one person has an image or fantasy regarding the other person which is not the way the other person is, and that the other person cannot possibly live up to.

Internet pornography is now a significant issue among Christian men, including candidates for ordination, perhaps recalling the vision given to Ezekiel:

Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, every man in his room of pictures? (Ezek. 8:12, RSV).

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

### **JOINED TO IDOLS**

Idolatry involves an enormous investment of the self in the idol. Once this investment has been made, it is virtually impossible to withdraw. We set up idols instead of worshipping God as He is, because instead of the love of God we want to substitute self-love, and for God's rule we want to substitute self-rule. We set up the idol in a way that we think will suit us better than God does—it will do what we say and give us what we want. We are really worshipping ourselves in this extension of ourselves that is the idol. Trouble is, because of the elements we have identified so far—the delusion, the degradation and the demonic takeover—the idol takes on a life of its own, and begins to rule us as a hard taskmaster, and we are in its thrall. Like some kind of addiction or dependency, a love-hate relationship is set up between the self and the idol, from which the self cannot break free, but can only descend into deeper bondage.

Hence God's chilling judgement on the idolater:

Ephraim is joined to idols—  
let him alone (Hosea 4:17).

God gives us over to our idolatry—as Paul says in Romans 1 (see vv. 24, 26, 28). At the same time God says:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . .  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender (Hosea 11:8).

So in the action of giving us over to what will destroy us, God has in view His means of saving us for Himself.

### **GOD'S JUDGEMENT ON IDOLS**

In the prophetic words of Isaiah, God pictures the judgement that will come on Babylon and its idol-gods that have held Israel in captivity:

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops,  
their idols are on beasts and cattle;  
these things you carry are loaded  
as burdens on weary animals.  
They stoop, they bow down together;  
they cannot save the burden,  
but themselves go into captivity (Isa. 46:1–2).

The idols can do nothing to help themselves or anyone else. As always, they have to be carried as heavy burdens—this time into captivity themselves—bowing as before a superior power. Not such as this is the God of Israel:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from your birth,



## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

carried from the womb;  
even to your old age I am he,  
even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save (Isa. 46:3–4).

God calls the idol-powers to account by bringing them into court and requiring that they present their case, and show if they can in any way match God:

Set forth your case, says the LORD;  
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.  
Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen.  
Tell us the former things, what they are,  
so that we may consider them,  
and that we may know their outcome;  
or declare to us the things to come.  
Tell us what is to come hereafter,  
that we may know that you are gods;  
do good, or do harm,  
that we may be afraid and terrified.  
You, indeed, are nothing  
and your work is nothing at all;  
whoever chooses you is an abomination (Isa. 41:21–24).

God then specifies what He is going to do to rescue Israel from Babylon. God alone can do this, and can announce it before it happens, and then can bring it to pass. None of the so-called ‘gods’, despite what is claimed for them, can do anything like that:

No, they are all a delusion;  
their works are nothing;  
their images are empty wind (Isa. 41:29).

With these prophetic words, Israel is being encouraged to trust entirely in God, and to abandon the idols, which will be no use to them when the judgement comes:

On that day people will throw away  
to the moles and to the bats  
their idols of silver and their idols of gold,  
which they made for themselves to worship,  
to enter the caverns of the rocks  
and the clefts in the crags,  
from the terror of the LORD,  
and from the glory of his majesty,  
when he rises to terrify the earth (Isa. 2:20–21).

Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, ‘Away with you!’ (Isa. 30:22).

What follows then? After God has passed judgement in court on the uselessness of idols, He announces the appearance of His servant, who will suffer:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights (Isa. 42:1).

## *Foolishness and Idolatry*

The clutter of idols and images is swept away, and in their place is revealed the true image of God in person (see Col. 1:15), who comes in judgement with saving grace.

### **DELIVERED FROM IDOLS**

In connection with the action of the cross, the New Testament says nothing directly about how it deals with idolatry. Sin, wrath, death, the world, the flesh and the devil, are all specified as having been dealt with in the cross. Nothing is said about idolatry. In the cross the core issue of our defiant rejection of God is dealt with, and we are brought back to God. That settles the matter of idolatry. Face to face with all the glory of God in Christ, what need or place is there for any other 'gods'? We are His.

The effects of this are dramatic. Our deluded mind is cured, and we are given 'a sound mind' (2 Tim. 1:7, AV), settled and able to see things for what they really are, and are not. We are like the Thessalonians, who 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9), and we are like the Ephesians who in great fear consigned their precious magic books to the fire (see Acts 19:17–20).

Since God did not hold back His Son from the cross, He will be confident in not holding back whatever is necessary to bring us to this point. Richard Wurmbrand wrote of the beneficial effects of persecution of Christians under communism:

The Orthodox Christians in Russia are completely changed. Millions of them have passed through prisons. There they had no beads, no crucifixes, no holy images, no incense, no candles. The laymen were in prison without an ordained priest. The priests had no robes, no wheat bread, no wine to consecrate, no holy oils, no books with prepared prayers to be read. And they found out that they could get by without all these things, by going to God directly in prayer. They began to pray and God began to pour forth His Spirit upon them. A genuine spiritual awakening, very similar to fundamental Christianity, is taking place among the Orthodox in Russia.<sup>5</sup>

The same applies to those of us who have made our idol to be the Bible, our theology, or our theological stance:

God is 'the Truth.' The Bible is the 'truth about the Truth.' Theology is the 'truth about the truth about the Truth.' Fundamentalism is the 'truth about the truth about the truth about the Truth.' And Christian people live in these many truths about the Truth, and, because of them, have not 'the Truth.' Hungry, beaten and doped, we had forgotten theology and the Bible. We had forgotten the 'truths about the Truth' and therefore we lived in 'the Truth.' It is written, 'The Son of man will come in the hour when you do not think and on a day you do not know.' We could not think any more. In our darkest hours of tortures the Son of man came to us, making the prison walls shine like diamonds and filling the cells with light. Somewhere, far away, were the torturers below us in the sphere of the body. But the spirit rejoiced in the Lord. We would not have given up this joy for that of kingly palaces.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ: Today's Martyr Church*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1970, pp. 171–2.

<sup>6</sup> Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, p. 99.