

Pray

Reading

I'm going to read Jonah chapter 2 verses 1 to 9, but my main focus will be on verse 8. These are the words of God:

1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

 "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;

 out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

3 For YOU cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;

 all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

4 Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;

 yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.'

5 The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;

 weeds were wrapped about my head

6 at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet YOU brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.

7 When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

8 Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;

what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!"

(Jonah 2:1–9)

Intro

Last week we were looking at how God answers us in our deepest distress. It's often when we are at our very lowest that we have the deepest insights about who we are and who God is.

And Jonah was about as low as it's possible to be, both literally and figuratively. You may have noticed how often the writer uses the word "down". Jonah goes "down" to Joppa, he goes "down" into the ship, then he goes "down" into the inner part of the ship, then he is thrown down into the sea, and if that isn't enough, he is swallowed down into the guts of a great fish.

But what the book of Jonah suggests is that Jonah still has further down to go. Because there are still depths in his own heart which are yet to be reached with the gospel. And maybe that's true for us too.

I want to focus on chapter 2 verse 8, which is the central sentence of the book, and it's the only time in Jonah where we get a direct statement that is universally applicable, so it really sticks out. Jonah says this:

8 Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

(Jonah 2:8)

What does he mean exactly? 3 headings.

The Definition of Idols

The Danger of Idols

The Defeat of Idols

1. The Definition of Idols

When Jonah says the word “idol”, often what we think of, and what Jonah is likely thinking of, are little images carved out of stone or wood, or moulded from metal.

It’s a physical effigy made to look like a man or an animal, to which people bow down to and serve. They’re objects of worship.

God speaks explicitly against this in the second commandment.

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...”
(Exodus 20:3–5a)

So just to be clear: the problem is **not** the act of manufacturing of an image itself. In fact, within a few chapters of this, God commands that images of cherubim be made. And in the book of Numbers God commands Moses to make a bronze serpent.

The problem is not the making of the image. The problem is the “bowing down” and serving that image, as if it were God. That’s what makes something an idol.

The Reformers in the 16th Century believed that one of the central issues with Roman Catholicism was idolatry. They believed that religious statues and icons and relics were being bowed down to and served, instead of God Himself. And so some of the Reformers set about literally taking a sledgehammer to these “carved images”, because in their view these images were encouraging people to treat them as if they were God.

However, the problem, as the Reformers well knew, is that many idols are not smashable with a sledgehammer. Because many idols, perhaps most idols, are in here - in our hearts.

Our hearts are “foundries [or factories] of idols”.

Because God made human beings to be worshippers of Him by default and by design, if our hearts do not worship Him, then we will feel compelled to worship something else.

There's a spiritual vacuum in every human heart into which SOMETHING must go. As Bob Dylan sang: "You're gonna have to serve somebody." I hope you appreciate my up-to-date cultural references. That one's from 1979.

What exactly is an idol? Tim Keller in his book Counterfeit Gods puts it like this:

An idol is anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God. Anything you seek to give you what only God can give. Anything that is so central and essential to your life, that should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.

You think I must have THAT thing or that person in order to feel complete and satisfied and secure, and for my life to have meaning and significance. And you're willing to make real sacrifices in order to get more of that thing or person. So in other words, we treat idols in the same way we were designed to relate to God. The idol becomes a God substitute. Functionally, we are looking to the idol for our hope of salvation.

And so literally anything in life can serve as an idol. Your career, your kids, your spouse, your sex life, you name it.

Technology is often talked about as if it will be our saviour. There is the view that if technology and artificial intelligence can keep evolving, it could usher in a future where life is prolonged indefinitely, all diseases can be engineered out of existence, and wars can become a thing of the past. It's vision of the new creation, but instead of God at the center, you have technology.

The public intellectual Yuval Noah Harari has gone on record as saying: "Artificial Intelligence will give us the ability to write a Bible that is *actually true*" You see? Technology takes the place of God and God's word.

Transhumanist Martine Rothblatt says that by building artificial intelligence systems "we are making God." The futurist Ray Kurzweil who works for Google was asked: "Does God exist?" He replied, "I would say, 'Not yet.'"

In other words, we're in the process of making him ourselves.

The theologian A W Tozer wrote:

Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than

idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom, a libel on his character.

What does Tozer mean? He means that when we turn away from God to a different god, to try and get things that only God can give us, we are saying to God, “You’re not good enough. Not generous enough. Not kind enough. Not smart enough. You don’t love me enough. I need someone or something else who is better.”

That’s why the Bible speaks of idolatry as spiritual adultery. It is cheating on God Himself. It is making a cuckold of Him. It is spiritually sleeping around. When we set up an idol in place of God, we’re saying to God and announcing to the world, “I’m not getting what I want out of this relationship. It’s not me, it’s you. I’ve met someone else who better meets my needs. Pack your things and get out.”

Tim Keller says:

Spiritually speaking, if it’s not God who is the lover of your soul, if it’s not God, in whose arms you are spiritually, if it’s not God whose meaning is the source of your meaning, whose affirmation is the source of your self-worth, and whose power is the

source of your security – if it's not God, you're 'in bed with' something [else] spiritually.”

So Jonah is quite right to condemn the worship of idols here in verse 8.

That's our first heading then, the definition of idols. Second heading, the danger of idols.

2. The Danger Of Idols

There's at least three reasons why idols are dangerous. Firstly, they're dangerous because they have no power to save you.

Look at how Jonah describes idols in verse 8. He describes them as VAIN:

Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
(Jonah 2:8)

In Hebrew the phrase is literally “those who pay regard to worthlessnesses of nothingness.”

It's an emphatic way of saying: it is useless to worship an idol because the idol is not a thing at all: it's actually the absence of a thing. And therefore it's utterly powerless. There's no power to speak or to save. An idol is utterly impotent and worthless.

Secondly, idols are dangerous because they will damage and ultimately destroy you.

Look at the second part of verse 8.

Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
(Jonah 2:8)

What does it mean that people who worship idols “forsake their hope of steadfast love”.

There’s actually two ways of understanding that phrase.

Some scholars say, the person worshiping an idol hopes for steadfast love from the idol. They believe the idol will love them, but actually they will eat you alive.

I’ve used this quotation before, but I think it’s worth repeating. It’s from David Foster Wallace, an author who was not a believer, but he said:

There is no such thing as NOT worshipping.
EVERYBODY worships. The only choice we get is
WHAT to worship. And an outstanding reason for
choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to
worship... is that pretty much anything else you
worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things... then you will never feel you have enough.

Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. [...]

Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.”

To use Jonah’s words, you hope for steadfast love from your idols, but they always forsake you - they always harm you, and punish you, and make you utterly miserable.

But there’s another way of understanding chapter 2 verse 8:

Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
(Jonah 2:8)

The other way of understanding it is like this: if you continue to look for steadfast love from your idols, you cannot receive steadfast love from God. If your hands are filled with idols, you cannot take hold of the steadfast love that God wants to give you. As Jesus said in the context of worshipping money, you cannot serve two masters.

In other words, idolatry always involves an exchange. We exchange God for something that is not God. And when we do that we exchange God's love for something that is not God's love. We forsake our hope of steadfast love.

So idols are dangerous because they're powerless, they're damaging and destructive, and thirdly, idols are dangerous because they're incredibly deep in every human heart.

If you've been a Christian for a few years, you may be thinking, well none of this is news to me. I get it. I've heard plenty of sermons and read plenty of books about idolatry. But I'm a Christian. I worship the true God.

But one of the things Jonah teaches us, is that even when we think we understand the goodness of God, we think we understand the gospel of Jesus Christ, actually, we don't. Because there's still idolatry deep in our hearts.

What do I mean? Look at Jonah. In this prayer of thanksgiving in verses 1 to 9, Jonah recognises God's grace towards him. He really gets it. In verse 6, he says,

you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.
(Jonah 2:6b)

And in verse 9, he says:

9 ...I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay. [in other words,
I will obey you].
Salvation belongs to the Lord!"
(Jonah 2:9)

So in that sense, Jonah is a true believer. He understands that God has been gracious to him, he gives thanks to him, and he vows to obey him. God, you have saved me from destruction!

And yet. At the end of chapter 4, when God saves the Ninevites from destruction, what is Jonah's response?

4...it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.
(Jonah 4:1)

Anger has a way of revealing our deeper idols. Because our strongest feelings reveal our deepest loves. The reason for Jonah's anger is that there's still idolatry deep in his heart, even though he's a believer. And it's so deep, he has no idea it's there.

Look again at chapter 2 verse 8. Jonah says, quite rightly:

8 Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.
(Jonah 2:8)

But who's he talking about there? Is this a moment of humble self-knowledge on Jonah's part? Is he condemning the idolatry he sees in his own heart? When he says "those who pay regard to vain idols", who is he thinking of, primarily?

Remember in verse 5, the sailors cried out to their idols. And the implication is that this is still fresh in Jonah's mind, and that he's thinking about THEIR idolatry. And the idolatry of the Ninevites, the enemies of Israel.

His prayer echoes Psalm 31 verse 6 which says:

I HATE those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the Lord.
(Psalm 31:6)

I HATE those people who do that, thinks Jonah.

But **I** trust in the Lord. I'm ok.

But as we'll see over the next few weeks, Jonah is not ok. God is going to take him down even further than the belly of the great fish, in order to show Jonah - and us - that actually, we can be just as guilty of idolatry as the Ninevites and the sailors.

It's not just anger that can reveal our deeper idols.

Martin Luther says, you want to know if you have an idol? He says: "...when things go wrong, do you, instead of fleeing TO [God], flee FROM Him? [If you do] Then you have another god."

Well in chapter 1, as you remember, Jonah did exactly that: he fled from God. And even at the end of the book,

what happens? He tells God “I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” Kill me now. I’m done talking to you.

What do you do when things go wrong? What do you do when you hear God’s word to you, in Scripture, and it asks of you to believe something or do something you find hard? Do you run away from God, or even become self-destructive as Jonah does? We have deep idols, and we may not be aware of them.

You know it’s not just worshipping things like power or money or approval or technology that is idolatry. Idolatry can also be reducing God in our mind so that he fits our view of what he should be like. The reason the pagans created little household idols is because they’re small enough to fit in your hand. They’re manageable. Localized. Domesticated. They go where you want them to go.

And ironically, Jonah does the same thing, in his mind. He wants a God who is gracious enough to rescue him from the depths, but not gracious enough to rescue the Ninevites.

Because if God were to treat THEM the same way He’s treated Jonah, then Jonah will have to face up to the fact

that he's just like they are. He will no longer have any grounds for boasting, for sneering, for being dismissive, for looking down on or condemning others.

But there's another reason Jonah doesn't want God to forgive them.

Douglas Murray, the English author and political commentator, has written about how the greatest need of our society is re-learning how to forgive. He says in place of forgiveness today we have "cancel culture" and "revenge culture". He says the reason we hate forgiveness is because we're determined to make people pay for their sins. Douglas Murray is an atheist, but he says, I lament the fact that we have kept Christianity's concept of sin while throwing out Christianity's concept of grace and redemption.

Well, that's Jonah isn't it? He's determined that the Ninevites should pay for their sins.

You know a lot of commentators point out that Jonah is much like the older brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

You remember, there's the younger son who runs away from his Father and gives himself to prostitutes and wild living. The younger brother is like the sailors or the Ninevites, the pagans. And then there's the older brother. The religious one, the moral one. The older brother is like Jonah.

And what happens when the younger brother repents and returns to the father, and the father embraces him and forgives him. The older brother HATES it. He's furious, just like Jonah is at the end of the HIS story. He refuses to join the party. He resents his Father's kindness and mercy.

Why? Because he wants a father who rewards "the good people" like him, and condemns the "bad people" like his brother, rather than a father who extends the same grace to everyone. So in Verse 9: "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" - but Jonah wants to tell God who he should give it to.

And that is the ultimate act of idolatry in the depths of Jonah's heart, and in the depths of many of our hearts: we want God, but one we can control.

We say we're Christian, that we love Jesus, but actually we only love the version of Jesus who holds views agreeable to our own.

When the Israelites worshiped the golden calf in Exodus chapter 32, they SAID they were worshiping Yahweh. They may even have BELIEVED that they were worshiping Yahweh. But they were still committing the grossest idolatry, and they were punished for it.

The great irony of Jonah is that all the obvious idol worshippers like the sailors and the Ninevites repent and turn to God, whereas Jonah, the worshipper of the one true God, turns away from him, because he refuses to accept God as He actually is.

The sailors experience God's steadfast love, and Jonah ends up in the sea. The Ninevites experience God's steadfast love, and Jonah ends up wanting to die.

Idols are deep, they're deceptive. They can even masquerade as true worship of the true God.

So, what hope is there to defeat our idols? That's our final heading.

3. The Defeat Of Idols

How can we be released from the hold these idols have over us? They are dangerous, they are deceptive, and they're deep.

The only way to get these idols off the throne of our hearts, is to displace them with something more attractive to us than they are.

In a famous 19th Century sermon called *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, Thomas Chalmers said,

the way to disengage the heart from the positive love of one great and ascendant object, is to fasten it in positive love to another... not by exposing the worthlessness of the former, but by addressing to the mental eye the worth and excellence of the latter...

What's he saying? He's saying that the only way to kill our love for our idols is to kindle our love for Christ. Christ "drives out" our idols by so occupying our hearts, that there's no longer any room there for anything else.

We fill our hearts with Christ, says Chalmers, by “addressing to the mental eye the worth and excellence” of Christ.

Jonah chapter 2 verse 8 gives us a clue about how we do that. You remember it talks about:

Those who pay regard to vain idols...
(Jonah 2:8)

The word “pay regard” carries the sense of “gazing intently at” “focusing on” “giving your full attention to”.

So what can free us from paying regard to vain idols? By paying regard instead to the beauty of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. We must “gaze intently” at Christ. Pay regard to Him. Focus on Him. Give our full attention to Him.

And as we do that, we find that to the extent His attractiveness occupies our hearts, the attractiveness of our idols will shrink and fade. If you’re paying regard to a small black and white image of the Grand Canyon, but then someone takes you to the edge of the Grand Canyon itself, you look up. You lose interest in the image.

Now, WE have the advantage of being able to see the beauty of Christ in a way which Jonah could not.

Because we live this side of the cross. And nothing shows the beauty of Christ more luminously than the cross.

How often do you gaze intently at the cross? I don't mean looking at a piece of wood like these ones down here. I mean, how often do you reflect on what the cross tells you about the beauty and steadfast love of the Lord Jesus Christ?

The 19th Century English pastor, J C Ryle, wrote:

...all Christ's sufferings [on the cross] were endured voluntarily and of His own free will. He was under no compulsion. Of His own choice He laid down His life. Of His own choice He went to the cross to finish the work He came to do. He might easily have summoned legions of angels with a word, and scattered Pilate and Herod and all their armies, like chaff before the wind. But he was a willing sufferer. His heart was set on the salvation of sinners. He was resolved to open a fountain for all sin and uncleanness, by shedding His own blood.

Now, when I think of all this [says Ryle] I see nothing painful or disagreeable in the subject of Christ's cross. On the contrary, I see in it wisdom and power, peace and hope, joy and gladness, comfort and consolation.

The more I look at the cross in my mind's eye, the more fulness I seem to discern in it. The longer I dwell on the cross in my thoughts, the more I am satisfied that there is more to be learned at the foot of the cross than anywhere else in the world.

[He says:] I might sometimes fancy that God the Father is too high and holy to care for such miserable, corrupt creatures as we are. But I cannot, must not, dare not think it, when I look at the cross of Christ."

The Puritan John Owen said:

Fill your affections with the cross of Christ, that there may be no room for sin. The world once put [Christ] out of the house into a stable...; let [Christ] now turn the WORLD out of doors, when he is come to sanctify us.

But of course for the cross to be truly beautiful to us, we have to see our deep need of it.

That's something Jonah didn't fully see. He didn't see his OWN idolatry. So he didn't see that his need for the grace of God was just as great as the people he habitually looked down on.

Do you?

Let's pray.