

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which will take us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. And for a few weeks, we are looking at the specific areas where God through Isaiah was calling the Israelites out for breaking the covenant, areas that we also need God’s exhortation today. Two weeks ago, we looked at Judah’s injustice, their mistreatment of the poor and oppressed, and last week we looked at their empty worship, their performative religion. This week, we will look at their idolatry, specifically the ways they were trusting in other nations for their protection and security instead of putting their trust in God. The specific question for Judah, and then for us, is this:

In your distress and when you feel threatened, will you trust in God for protection and peace or will you trust in other nations?

In our distress and when we feel threatened, will we turn to God or will we turn to something or someone else for protection and peace?

Remember that Isaiah was a covenant mediator prophet, and at the very beginning of the Ten Commandments in the Law of Moses are these words:

**Exodus 20:1–5** - And God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup>“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>3</sup>“You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup>“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them...”

Have no other gods before me, and do not make an image or an idol of anything. In those days, many idols had physical form, as statues or icons representing foreign gods. And during Isaiah’s time, Israel was guilty of this idolatry.

**Isaiah 2:6–9** - You, Lord, have abandoned your people, the descendants of Jacob. They are full of superstitions from the East; they practice divination like the Philistines and embrace pagan customs. <sup>7</sup> Their land is full of silver and gold; there is no end to their treasures. Their land is full of horses; there is no end to their chariots. <sup>8</sup> Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to

what their fingers have made. <sup>9</sup> So people will be brought low and everyone humbled— do not forgive them.

Instead of worshiping God and living according to the covenant, they had turned aside to foreign gods. But idolatry is more than just worshiping statues and serving other gods. It's about trusting in people or things other than God, especially in times of distress or threat. In Isaiah's day, the people of Judah, southern Israel, were facing threats from neighboring nations. But instead of turning to God for help, they were turning to foreign nations such as Egypt and Assyria.

**Isaiah 30:1-5** - "Woe to the obstinate children," declares the LORD, "to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin; <sup>2</sup> who go down to Egypt without consulting me; who look for help to Pharaoh's protection, to Egypt's shade for refuge. <sup>3</sup> But Pharaoh's protection will be to your shame, Egypt's shade will bring you disgrace. <sup>4</sup> Though they have officials in Zoan and their envoys have arrived in Hanes, <sup>5</sup> everyone will be put to shame because of a people useless to them, who bring neither help nor advantage, but only shame and disgrace."

**Isaiah 31:1-3** - Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD. <sup>2</sup> Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take back his words. He will rise up against that wicked nation, against those who help evildoers. <sup>3</sup> But the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, those who help will stumble, those who are helped will fall; all will perish together.

When Isaiah was a prophet, the kingdom of Israel was broken into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, was facing pressure from Aram & Ephraim, two tribes in the northern kingdom, who in turn were facing pressure from a foreign power named Assyria. Judah, and their King Ahaz, were left with a decision, whether to ally with Assyria or stand against Aram & Ephraim on their own. But God, through Isaiah, tells Ahaz that there is a third choice – do not make an alliance with either nation, but trust Him:

**Isaiah 7:1–14** - When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. <sup>2</sup> Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people

were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken **by the wind**.<sup>3</sup> Then the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer’s Field.”<sup>4</sup> Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.’<sup>5</sup> Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah’s son have **plotted your ruin, saying**,<sup>6</sup> “Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.”<sup>7</sup> Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says: “It will not take place, it will not happen,<sup>8</sup> for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.”<sup>9</sup> The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah’s son. **If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.**”<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz,<sup>11</sup> “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”<sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”<sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also?”<sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

Through Isaiah, God tells the king to stand firm in his faith and put his trust in Him instead of making an alliance. Because even though he thinks an alliance will offer him protection and peace, he is submitting himself to a nation who will eventually turn and destroy him. But Ahaz refuses to trust God, and instead submits to Assyria, asking them to deal with the northern threat. Here is the historical account in 2 Kings 16:

**2 Kings 16:7–9** - Ahaz sent messengers to say to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, “I am your servant and vassal. Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.” And Ahaz took the silver and gold found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria. The king of Assyria complied by attacking Damascus and capturing it. He deported its inhabitants to Kir and put Rezin to death.

Because of Ahaz’s refusal to trust in God and his choice to become a servant of a foreign nation, Isaiah prophesies that God will use Assyria to discipline the people of Israel. Ahaz will end up being the last king in the line of David; the rest would be puppets of Assyria and then Babylon. In 100 years, by 587, all of Israel and Judah will be in exile, in captivity in Babylon. God, through Isaiah, told Ahaz “*If*

*you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all,”* and he even encouraged him to ask Him for a sign, but Ahaz would not, because his mind was already made up. God gives him a sign anyways, one that would have been very mysterious to Ahaz, in v. 14: *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel,”* But unfortunately, Ahaz will not place his trust in God. Instead, he puts his trust in what his eyes can see, the nation of Assyria, to the eventual destruction of his country.

Again, here is the question on the table for Ahaz and Israel:

In your distress and when you feel threatened, will you trust in God for protection and peace or will you trust in other nations?

And for us today:

In our distress and when we feel threatened, will we turn to God or will we turn to something or someone else for protection and peace?

Idolatry takes many forms. For some idols, we give our love to someone or something other than God. For others, it is serving. And for others, it is primarily about trusting them to deliver us from distress. The king was anxious, feeling threatened, in distress. But instead of turning to God, he turned to foreign nations to deliver and save him, to give him security.

Where do you turn when you are in distress? When you are anxious? When you are feeling threatened? What or who do you turn to in order to save or protect you? When you don't like the way you look, or you are feeling stressed by a project at work, or when your spouse is upsetting you, or when you are overwhelmed by the chaos of your world or the world around you?

The temptation is to turn to something or someone other than God, something that is promising to provide us with peace and protection. But if you turn to anything or anyone other than God, that is an idol. And while it may offer temporary peace and protection, it will ultimately let you down and make things worse.

Consider four areas where we can be guilty of this kind of idolatry, of trusting in something or someone other than God when we feel in distress or threatened.

### **1) Politics**

Trusting in politicians or ideologies. Politicians often “court the religious vote,” not because they believe in God and want to honor Him, but because they see religious people as people to be used in order to get elected. When faith in God diminishes, trust in politicians and political ideologies increases. We look to political parties to rescue us from distress, we see ideologies as ways to bring peace on earth. And when you give your trust to a politician, you may feel secure for a season. But if you put your trust in a President, political party, or ideology, it will backfire. They will devour you. They are not God.

**Isaiah 2:22** - Stop trusting in mere humans, who have but a breath in their nostrils. Why hold them in esteem?

**Psalms 118:8–9** - It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans. <sup>9</sup> It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

Vote your conscience, vote for the party or politician you believe best represents Biblical principles. But better to trust in the Lord for protection and peace and not give your allegiance to any politician.

## **2) Money and possessions**

Consumerism – buy more things and you will be happy, find comfort. Earn more money and you will be secure.

**Proverbs 18:10–11** - The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. <sup>11</sup> The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale.

What a Proverb. God’s name, His character, is a strong tower, a place of security and safety we can run into to protect us in the stress of life. The second verse mentions how the rich imagine their wealth to be a fortified city, a place that will protect them from suffering and the stress of life. But it’s all in their imagination. It’s not real. Their money is a false god that can not protect them from death or cancer or accidents or mental illness or relational strife.

Your money will not keep you safe. It will not protect you from the stress or trials of life. In fact, it can often introduce more problems.

## **3) Addictions**

Or you can escape by scrolling, surfing the web, playing games, drinking alcohol, doing drugs, watching porn, eating food, buying more things.

What are you looking to in order to provide you these things? Addictions can provide temporary peace and protection from our distress. But here's the thing: idols can not deliver on their promises. They will not ultimately deliver you, but will turn and devour you.

As Cornelius Plantinga wrote, "No matter how they start, addictions operate like this: addictions begin when we use something we believe will relieve distress. Then eventually the addictions create their own distress. And finally, addicts spiral down when they try to cure the additional pain with the thing that caused it."

**You imagine your idol to be a fortified city, but it is not.** You feel bad about yourself, so you gossip and slander and tear others down, but doing this doesn't give you the value and self-esteem you are looking for. You turn to food to numb the pain and feel good, but after the temporary pleasure wears off, you feel worse about yourself. You turn to pornography, or gambling, or social media, or shopping, or online games, or videos, or anything else to numb out or find some pleasure in this world, but in the end, it only makes things worse. You run to your addiction, imagining it a fortified city, a wall too high for your troubles to scale. But instead, you find that you are like a city with broken down walls, and there is no refuge in your addiction from the pain of life.

In our distress, so many of us turn to addictions to soothe us. But they can not save us. As Jeremiah put it:

**Jeremiah 2:13** – "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

#### **4) Other people**

Romantic love will not save you. No other person can give you the ultimate protection and peace your heart longs for. Even the best earthly partner will eventually die or leave, or can not be there forever. Only the Lord will keep your heart safe.

**Jeremiah 17:5** - This is what the Lord says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord.”

**John 2:24–25** - But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. <sup>25</sup> He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

C.S. Lewis – “Idols always break the hearts of their worshipers” (The Four Loves).

### 5) Our own efforts

Or, we try harder to control our environment, to order things in a way that will provide us with the peace and protection we long for. But no matter how hard we try, we can not keep the anxiety of life away.

**James 4:13–15** - Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” <sup>14</sup> Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. <sup>15</sup> Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

Life is hard and full of anxiety, threats, and distress. And we all turn to things other than God searching for a way to find peace and protection. But even though these options may provide temporary relief, none of them will give us what our hearts are longing for. And worse, many of them will only make things worse. But there is a better way.

Remember that in Isaiah 7, he prophesies that the sign will be a virgin giving birth to a son.

**Isaiah 7:14** - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

This was fulfilled.

**Matthew 1:18–25** - This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this,

an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is **from the Holy Spirit**.<sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:<sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.<sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Jesus, the Messiah, will be the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy. He will be God with us, Immanuel. And He will save His people from their sins, giving them eternal life.

Jesus is God with us. No matter what distress comes your way, He is with you. The promise is never that God’s protection means that no harm will ever happen to you. We live in a broken world. But Emmanuel has overcome sin and death.

**John 16:33** – “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Trust in Him, no matter what the circumstances.

**Philippians 4:12–13** - I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.<sup>13</sup> I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Whatever happens, he is always with us.

**Hebrews 13:5–6** - Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”<sup>6</sup> So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?”

Nothing can separate us from Emmanuel and His love:

**Romans 8:35–39** - Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?<sup>36</sup> As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to



be slaughtered.” <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup>neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Even death can not separate us.

**Philippians 1:21–26** - For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! <sup>23</sup>I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; <sup>24</sup>but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. <sup>25</sup>Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup>so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

And so, turn to God in prayer, for that is where peace is found.

**Philippians 4:6–7** - Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**Isaiah 26:3–4** - You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. <sup>4</sup>Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.

**Proverbs 3:5–6** - Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; <sup>6</sup>in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

In your distress, and when you feel threatened, do not turn to idols, who can not save you, but turn to the Lord for protection and peace.