

Broomfield



# PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

---

Volume 3 Issue 50

December 19, 2004

## The Idolatrous

In Matthew 7:1 we read these words:

“Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

One of the reasons for the giving of this command is that we generally struggle with different sin: Some struggle with pride, others envy. And yet, whatever sin you may struggle with today, I want you to notice that there is a sin that each one of us struggles with –knowingly or unknowingly. And this sin is so subtle in its form and nature that it may be present even in the midst of the most glorious service in the name of Christ. Idolatry is that sin.

Romans 1:21-23, “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.”

The description of Romans 1 and the idolatrous activity of the Gentile is not so much defined by a particular sin – like bowing down and worshipping an idol or lifting up an image as god – but rather any and all sin is in fact idolatry. In fact 1 Samuel equates sin with idolatry.

1 Samuel 15:23, “For rebellion *is as* the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness *is as* iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from *being* king.”

Truly, a universal sin of man is idolatry, all of us struggle with it. And that is why it is no surprise to discover that of the many who missed the birth of Christ on that first advent that the idolater is one of them.

## The Idolatrous Neglected the Birth of Christ

Luke 2:1-7, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (*And* this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his

espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

This passage details the events of the first Christmas day. And as we have seen, this passage is explicitly concerned with a lonely birth. On that first Christmas there were no midwives, nurses, relatives or friends present. The Bible does not mention the coming of ambassadors, foreign emissaries or even the local police chief and mayor coming to welcome this King of Kings. Mary was left alone to birth, clean, swaddle, and lay Christ in the manger.

Luke 2:7, “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

What a contrast to the celebrations that accompanied the birth of royalty in that day. Josephus records the circumstances surrounding the birth of one of Ptolemy’s sons.<sup>1</sup> And though this predates Christ, it is illustrative of the lavish celebrations that occurred on account of the birth of a king in that day.

When Ptolemy’s son was born all with affluence and influence in Syria were to keep a festival, including any country that was subject to Syria. Furthermore, representatives of each of the surrounding nations subject to Syria were sent to honor the king and his son with banquets and gifts of money. And as would be expected, the size of the gift was all-important; to give a small gift was an insult. As such, we read of Hyrcanus’ generous gift of over two hundred slaves to the king, each carrying a talent in their hand.<sup>2</sup>

Now brothers and sisters, in comparison to the degree of influence and power exerted by Rome in the days of Christ, Josephus’ description details a rather insignificant birth of and insignificant son of an insignificant leader, Ptolemy. Imagine the events that would have surrounded the birth of one of Caesar’s sons. The tribute given would be grand. The gatherings would be spectacular. The banquets would be superb. The feast days, weeks of celebration, the sacrifices and offerings made would surpass imagination. There would not be a soldier in Rome that would not be affected by it!

And yet, in Bethlehem on that first Christmas there is nothing but silence. A multitude of Roman soldiers and officials were present (on account of the census) and not one observed the birth of the King of the Jews. Not one observed the Incarnation of God. Not one was present to witness the birth of God’s only begotten Son! Why?

Was it because of ignorance? No, Matthew 2:1-3 indicates that Herod, and thus the Romans, knew of the birth of this King. Was it because of hostility? No! The Romans never considered the Jews a threat.

### The Cause: Idolatry

Luke 2:1, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”

This verse contains the reason why the numerous Roman soldiers stationed in and around Bethlehem missed the birth of Christ: Caesar Augustus!

---

<sup>1</sup> Josephus records this in *Antiquities* 12.4.7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Note: Recall that in Christ’s day, one talent of gold was valued at a little under 6000 denarii (~16 1/2 years worth of labor).

As you will recall, Caesar Augustus or Augustus Caesar stands as the greatest leader that Rome, and perhaps the world, would ever know. He lived from 63 BC to 14 AD during which time he reigned for fifty-seven years (43 BC to 14 AD). It was under his reign that Rome went from being a Republic (ruled by many) to an Empire (ruled by one) which was no small thing. For much of the first five hundred years of Roman history, the nation was ruled not by an emperor, but by a Senate. The Senate was a large group of men usually elected from the twenty-five leading families of Rome. And thus, for one man to take total control of Rome would either mean that a civil war had taken place or that the Senate had relinquished its power – a rather unlikely event. Yet, with Augustus Caesar the unlikely occurred.

Upon the death of Julius Caesar the threat of civil war was great in Rome. Thus, the Senate strategically charged three men with the protection of Rome: Mark Antony, Lepidus, and Octavius (later called Augustus). (This is known as the Second Triumvirate.) The rationale behind this triumvirate is that by tacitly calling these men the “Protectors of Rome” other leaders could not rise and seek power without first battling the combined forces of the triumvirate. If one of the participants of the triumvirate sought power, the other two would oppose him.

Now in spite of how prudent the calling of this triumvirate looked on paper, it led to trouble because each of these leaders wanted supreme power. It did not take long for these generals to marshal their army and begin fighting against one another. In the end (and well after the five year term of protection granted by the Senate) Augustus emerged as the victor, which meant for the Senate that he probably would march on Rome and forcibly rule – much like his grand-uncle Julius Caesar had done. And yet, to the surprise and amazement of everyone, Augustus returned to Rome and relinquished all his authority to the Senate. In essence he said, “Now that I have restored order to Rome, I now restore Rome to you!”

Overwhelmed by this gesture, the Senate unanimously restored to Augustus all the power he previously enjoyed in the triumvirate and more! This made Rome an Empire (ruled by one) rather than a Republic (rule by many).

Now if the advent of Augustus’ reign was shrewd, his regency as Caesar was little short of amazing. Under Augustus’ reign, Rome was ushered into a “Golden Age” — an age where the people of Rome and, more importantly, the army experienced rest, security, prosperity, justice, law and order and stability. In fact, Augustus boasted that he had, “pacified the world” and “solemnly closed the Temple of Janus.”<sup>3</sup>

Now this last phrase is quite significant. Recall that the Roman Temple of Janus Quirinus received sacrifices ONLY *during times of war*. It was only when Rome was at peace, both on land and sea, that these doors could be shut. In fact, in the five hundred years of Roman history before Augustus the doors had been closed only twice!<sup>4</sup> And thus it was quite an accomplishment and boast to be the reigning leader/general when these doors were closed. Under Augustus, the doors were shut no less than three times! Augustus Caesar did what no leader before or after him could do; he ushered in the *Pax Romana* — the Peace of Rome. And that is why on January 1, 42 BC Augustus was recognized as “the son of god” (*divi filius*). By the time of Christ’s birth, Augustus was worshipped as god.<sup>5</sup>

In light of all of this, it is little wonder that when God became man in Bethlehem that first Christmas day, every Roman soldier missed it. Rather than rushing to see this incarnate God –as did the shepherds<sup>6</sup> – or

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, Jerome Carcopino, page 14

<sup>4</sup> See Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, page 65.

<sup>5</sup> See Frederick Danker’s commentary on Luke, *Jesus and the New Age*, page 54. Danker writes of Augustus, “In various parts of the empire he was acclaimed as ‘God’ (*divus*) and ‘Savior’ (*soter*), and recognized as the world’s great architect of peace.”

<sup>6</sup> Luke. 2:15-17

bring gifts in celebration of the arrival of this newborn King – as did the magi<sup>7</sup>—or rejoice and exalt in God’s work –as did the angels<sup>8</sup> – or praise and thank God – as did Simeon and Anna<sup>9</sup>—the Romans viewed Jesus’ birth as just one more number in their census! Why? Because of their idolatry! Christ did not fit into the Roman pantheon. The Romans had Augustus Caesar.

They trusted in Caesar Augustus because he was their stability. He was their strength. He was their hope and joy. He was their god. Truly it is the idolatrous that miss Christ!

## Modern Idolatry

Now all of this raises a very important question: Will you miss Christ on account of idolatry? You say, "Never! I'm a Christian! I'm a true worshiper of God."<sup>10</sup>

Oh, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. A. W. Tozer defined idolatry accordingly:

“Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place.”<sup>11</sup>

Is it possible for a child of God to fall into the sin of Idolatry? Indeed! Turn with me to Ezekiel 8.

This chapter was written in 592 B.C. (just 6 years before the final exile) to a people who had rejected the Covenant that God had established with them. The poor went unnoticed. The widows were neglected. The outcasts were abused. The pursuit of riches and happiness replaced the pursuit of God! The infiltration of pagan religions was pervasive. Apostasy was everywhere.

In this context Ezekiel having himself been deported in 597 is sitting by the river Chebar. In front of him are elders who no doubt have sought him out in order that they might know what God was going to do. The text picks it up here.

Ezekiel 8:1-4, “And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I sat in mine house, and the elders of Judah sat before me, that the hand of the Lord GOD fell there upon me. Then I beheld, and lo a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appearance of his loins even downward, fire; and from his loins even upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the colour of amber. And he put forth the form of an hand, and took me by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north; where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy. And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, according to the vision that I saw in the plain.”

Ezekiel 8:7-12, “And he brought me to the door of the court; and when I looked, behold a hole in the wall. Then said he unto me, Son of man, dig now in the wall: and when I had digged in the wall, behold a door. And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they

---

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 2:1-3

<sup>8</sup>Luke 2:8-14

<sup>9</sup>Luke 2:21

<sup>10</sup>Compare Philippians 3:3

<sup>11</sup>A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, pages 11-12

do here. So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The LORD seeth us not; the LORD hath forsaken the earth.”

Don't Miss It!

By the power of God, Ezekiel is granted a vision of the elders in Jerusalem as they really were. Before the people they stood as powerful and godly men! And yet, in the sight of God they were nothing less than idolaters!

Why?

Because they had bowed down to worship images? Not necessarily! Scripture never indicates that these elders physically began worshipping pagan gods. Rather, because they had rejected God! They had taken His laws for granted. They had lived for their own selfish ends. Indeed! As the Romans viewed Augustus Caesar, so God had become to these Elders NOT One to whom worship was due but One from whom blessings were derived. And thus, on account of their idolatry, the elders missed God!

Brothers and sisters, the Romans missed Christmas because Christ did not fit into their pantheon. The elders of Israel missed Christmas because Christ did not fit into their expectations of what God was for. And many this day in the church will miss Christmas on account of a false-view of Christ.

The idolater who misses Christmas is not just the one who overtly bows before the altar of a false god. Nor is it the non-Christian who does not know Christ. BUT the idolater is one who rejects God in the imaginations of their heart. He takes God, His word, and His commandments lightly. And he insists on his own will over God's. He serves God on his own terms. He refuses to honor Christ as Christ, but brings Him down to his own level and worships Him not as the King of kings. but as little more than the “good 'ol buddy in the sky who exists to bless me.”

Let me take this one step further I doubt that there are few here who wouldn't agree that we and all things in this world are for the glory of God.<sup>12</sup> BUT on account of the idolatrous thoughts that subtly dwell within us, so often we think that that while we exist for God's glory, GOD exists for our good. While we must be God-centered in all that we do, the consolation is believing that God is man-centered in all that He does.

And thus we believe that God exists to bless us. We believe redemption is for man. And that Christ's advent ultimately was for our benefit. And yet this subtle, seemingly insignificant conviction is the heart and soul of idolatry.

How much time have you spent this past year endeavoring to bless God? How much time have you spent desiring to serve Christ better? How much time have you spent ministering to Christ? How much time have you spent trying to please Him?

In your walk with God, have you been self-centered or God-centered?

---

<sup>12</sup> Compare 1 Corinthians 10:31

How much of your prayer life consisted of praise this past year? And you and I wonder why we struggle when it comes to the things of the Lord?

Listen, unless Christ be lifted up<sup>13</sup> we will never be healthy in our walks with God! We will fail to grow as we ought! Our fellowship will be stunted! Accordingly, let me introduce to the Christ child born in the manger — as He really is without being veiled by His humility.

Revelation 1:12-17. “And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last.”

Samuel Rutherford captured the passion of all who genuinely seek to observe the birth of Christ.

“...whether God come to His children with a rod or a crown, if He come Himself with it, it is well. Welcome, welcome, Jesus, what way soever Thou come, if we can get a sight of Thee! And sure I am, it is better to be sick, providing Christ come to the bedside and draw by the curtains, and say, ‘Courage, I am Thy salvation,’ then to enjoy health, being lusty and strong, and never to be visited of God.”<sup>14</sup>

Behold your God; let us receive Him!

---

<sup>13</sup> While this has reference to the crucifixion (John 12:33), nevertheless the context clearly implies a double-entendre. The background for this statement was the fact that God had and will continue to glorify the name of Christ (John 12:28ff).

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Letter #11, Page 52

## Subscription Information

A subscription to the *Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is on a free basis. To subscribe or unsubscribe send a post card to *Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word*®, Post Office Box 691, Windsor, Colorado 80550. Or you may send your request by email to [Nels Nelson](mailto:Nels.Nelson@broomfieldopc.com). *The Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is published regularly.

## VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Broomfield Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Broomfield Presbyterian Church is located at Kohl Elementary School, 10th Street and Kohl, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Broomfield Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon can be found at [The Idolatrous](http://www.theidolatrous.com). The web address for all sermons at Broomfield can be found out as follows: <http://broomfielddopc.sermonaudio.com>

## About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 19, 2004. Greg is the preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.