

Put Away the Foreign Gods

Genesis 35:1-15

Hosea 8:4 ⁴ With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.

The secular world in which we live is full of idols.

Idolatry is the worship of the creation, rather than the Creator.

Money, power, celebrities, science, sex, political leaders, security, fun, entertainment, beauty, exercise, sports, medicine, feelings, being liked... the list goes on.

My concern today is not primarily for the culture. Do I hope for our society to return to the One true God? Do I wish that our culture would quit running itself headlong over the cliff to their own destruction? Of course.

But, my concern is for you, and for me.

Regardless of what occurs in the world around us, God calls us to put away the foreign gods in our own hearts.

We have been following the life of Jacob.

It is Jacob who gives the first command to “put away foreign gods.”

In our passage today it will seem so simple. Jacob will give the command and it will be followed by the members of his household. Case closed. But most of you know enough about the Bible to know that the case is not closed.

The struggle to “put away the foreign gods” is the struggle that never seems to end.

Every believer must engage in this struggle throughout the entirety of their lives.

Read Genesis 35:1-7.

God said to Jacob,
"Arise,
go up to Bethel
and

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dwell there.
 Make an altar there
 to the God who appeared to you
 when you fled from your brother Esau."

God commands Jacob to return to Bethel.

Bethel is the place where God first appeared to Jacob when he was fleeing his brother Esau.

God made promises to Jacob then.

And Jacob had vowed that if God kept those promises, he would declare his exclusive loyalty to Him.

The horror of the story of Dinah in chapter 34 made clear that the fullness of God's promised blessing had not yet arrived. Jacob is back in the Land, but he is not experiencing a Land of Pure Delight.

This raises the question, "Can God be trusted to bring about the fullness of blessing?"

Or will Jacob look to some other source to find true life?

God simply commands Jacob to go up to Bethel, and there to make an altar. God is graciously nudging Jacob to worship Him, and in so doing, to keep the vow he made previously.

This is the first time that God commands an altar be made. Others had made altars, but they were always spontaneous acts of worship initiated by the person.

But here, Jacob is commanded to build the altar.

God expects Jacob to worship Him.

Jacob understands this.

2 So
 Jacob said
 to his household
 and
 to all who were with him,

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"Put away the foreign gods

that are among you

and

purify yourselves

and

change your garments.

3

Then

let us arise

and

go up to Bethel,

so that

I may make there an altar

to the God

who answers me

in the day of my distress

and

has been with me

wherever I have gone."

The first lesson is that putting away foreign gods is in the context of worship. Jacob does not think of putting away foreign gods because he wants to be a generally better person.

Jacob wants to offer to God pure and acceptable worship.

And in order to do this, he comes to the realization that he cannot worship more than one god.

All other gods must be put away.

Every Sunday, we approach God in worship. And in preparation for this worship, it is our duty to rid ourselves of every false god.

But even though putting away false gods prepares us for worship, putting away false gods does NOT prepare us for relationship with God.

Only in the context of our ongoing relationship with God, are brought to put away every idol.

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It is only as we are increasingly confident of God's covenant love to us that we will be properly motivated to put away every idol.

Commitment is the response to being loved.

God has not even raised the issue of foreign gods up to this point.

Look at how Jacob describes the One whom He is preparing to worship. He is the "God who answers me" and "who has been with me,". Jacob does not devote himself to a god that he does not know.

No one will be devoted to a God that they do not trust has their best interest in mind.

God has graciously brought Jacob to believe that He is a good God who keeps His promises.

Consider in your own heart how you view God. Is God a good and faithful Giver?

Or is God a selfish and cruel Taker?

One of the primary purposes of the Bible is to lay out before you the truth about God.

He is a good God who always keeps His promises.

All of Scripture declares this to us. But nowhere is it more powerfully demonstrated than in Jesus' death on the cross.

If you think of God as demanding more of you than He gives to you, you do not know God.

Our giving to God our wholehearted trust and devotion can only occur as we increasingly recognize the greatness of his covenant love to us.

The experience of pain and loss has the effect of breaking down trust. Unless we synthesize pain and suffering with God's goodness and love, we will never put away the foreign gods of our heart.

But make no mistake, to be in covenant relationship with God puts yourself on a collision course with every other idol of the heart.

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The command to put away foreign gods is not an option. To live in covenant relationship with God demands our exclusive loyalty to Him. God is jealous for all of us. Ironically, it is in abandoning ourselves completely to God that we find true happiness.

Jacob's command to "purify yourselves and to change your garments" must be understood in the context of putting away foreign gods. Jacob is not advocating that we are able to cleanse ourselves from all sin. The necessity of God's doing the washing is clear from Scripture. Only the blood of Christ and only the working of the Holy Spirit can truly cleanse us and clothe us in true righteousness.

The command to purify yourself is a command to engage in some form of ceremonial washing in anticipation of God's work. It is a recognition of personal corruption and the need for cleansing to come into the presence of a Holy God. Putting on new garments also symbolizes the need to be clean.

The basic principle is that we are not innately ready to meet with God. To enter into His presence without preparation and cleansing would be disastrous. And even though we are helpless to cleanse ourselves, by these actions Jacob's family agrees that they need cleansing. And they seek for that cleansing. The human actions are important.

Repentance and faith are actions that we do. They are necessary. But they do not in themselves cleanse us or make us ready to meet God.

We are not told the specifics of their ceremonial washing.

We are not told anything about the new garments that they put on.

We simply assume that these are a part of "putting away foreign gods".

4 So
 they gave to Jacob
 all the foreign gods that they had,
 and
 the rings that were in their ears.

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Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree
that was near Shechem.

Jacob's entire household, and all who were with him, gave to Jacob all their foreign gods.

By "foreign gods" it must mean the man-made physical objects that represented the foreign gods.

As we read this, we wonder who had these gods.

Rachel had stolen her dad's household gods.

The women of Shechem may have brought with them their gods.

But it seems that more than a few had idols to give.

In addition to the idols, many gave up their earrings.

These earrings were associated with idols.

They were worn as an outward expression of one's loyalty to a particular god.

It is striking that no one gives Jacob any resistance. We are not told of any internal struggle. They simply comply with Jacob's command. It seems so very simple.

But if putting away of our foreign gods is relatively simple, why is the temptation to worship foreign gods a struggle throughout Israel's history?

Joshua gives the same command in his day. And the people give Joshua the same positive response.

Joshua 24:14-16 ¹⁴ "Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." ¹⁶ Then the people

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answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods,

The prophet Samuel gives the same command in his day. And the people give the same positive response.

1 Samuel 7:3-4 ³ And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." ⁴ So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only.

The Psalmist seems to be dealing with the same problem of idolatry.

Psalm 24:3-4 ³ Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? ⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

How is it possible that putting away foreign gods can seem so easy, and yet prove so elusive?

In order to answer this question, we need to better understand what is meant by "foreign gods."

Technically speaking, there are no foreign gods.

The Bible recognizes only one true God.

Therefore, idols are tokens of gods that do not exist.

Psalm 115:3-9 ³ Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. ⁴ Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶ They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷ They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. ⁸ Those who make them become like them; so

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do all who trust in them. ⁹ O Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield.

Jeremiah 10:5-8 ⁵ Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good." ⁶ There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might. ⁷ Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you. ⁸ They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood!

Because of this, when we come to recognize God as the only true God, it should be the natural reflex of our soul to renounce every other false god. No one who calls upon Jesus as Savior and Lord should simultaneously continue to worship other gods.

If I previously worshipped the Muslim god, "Allah", upon believing in Jesus Christ, I would renounce Allah as my god. If I previously gave allegiance to any number of Hindu gods, upon believing in Jesus Christ, I would renounce these gods as false and give my devotion to Jesus alone.

Simple enough.

But foreign gods are more than illusions in our minds.

If it were so, once the illusion was exposed, we would never again struggle to give our allegiance to what is not real.

In addition to being a figment of our imagination, the Bible also describes the worshipping of idols as the worshipping of demons.

Psalms 106:36-37 ³⁶ They served their idols, which became a snare to them. ³⁷ They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons;

Behind idolatry is the worship of demons.

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Demons are not gods.

Demons are fallen angels.

Demons are powerful, created beings who have followed Satan in his rebellion to God.

Satan and his minions are constantly working to lure God's people away from God. They do this by making false promises to God's people. They do this by deceiving God's people into thinking that they are better able to bring about our happiness than is God.

Remember the Serpent's tactics with Eve.

"Do you mean to say that God won't let you have the fruit of the best tree in the Garden?"

God is holding you back from being all that you can be.

God does not want you to be truly happy. What kind of God treats His own children like God has treated you?

Take my advice, follow me, and you will find true blessing."

Add to this, that ever since the Fall, we have a tendency to love the gifts more than the Giver.

We want happiness. But we do not want the source of happiness.

God knows this. He knows that to continually bombard us with blessings would only spoil us more. God is the one who brings the curse upon the world such that nothing in this world will bring us ultimate satisfaction.

And so, God does not fulfill all our longings here and now.

He often takes the children he loves through terrible pain and sorrow.

He does this for our own good.

But it is difficult to see the end game when we are suffering.

As we experience pain and sorrow, dissatisfaction and frustration, and discontentment, our hearts are open to the subtle lies of Satan.

He whispers into our ear, "There is a better way. God does not love you. I can do more for you than He ever will."

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And mysteriously enough, in our initial turning from God, there seems to be some positive effects. The problem is that these initial gains are short lived and end in greater frustration. But the lies just keep coming. That might not have been what you were looking for, but try this. And on and on it goes.

Interesting enough, there is a god for every unfulfilled desire.

Are you lacking wisdom? There is a god of wisdom.

Are you in need of greater skill? There is a craftsman god.

Are you desiring sexual pleasure? There is a god for that.

Are you wanting your crops to bring a greater harvest? There is a god who can help with that.

Are you in need of greater security?

How about struggling to bear children?

Or maybe you want increased physical health or beauty?

Satan is always at work making promises to you that seem better than what God is currently providing.

And your heart feels that there is more to be had.

So, while we might formally put away our foreign gods, our hearts are continually drawn to the promises that they give.

We can be disgusted with the blatant idolatry of the unbelieving culture in which we live and simultaneously be struggling within our own hearts to reject the lies being fed to us.

This is why Paul can speak to Christians as he does:

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

The Colossians surely had renounced formal idolatry.

But they were still in a daily battle against internal desires.

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Some idolatry takes the form of corrupt desires. Paul has just listed a few of those.

But much idolatry plays on perfectly good desires.

This form of idolatry is far more difficult to recognize in ourselves.

Calvin says that our hearts are idol factories.

Do you love your spouse? Your heart is capable of making your spouse an idol.

Do you like your work?

Do you like your home, your family, your friends?

Do you like your health, your accomplishments, your beauty?

Do you like fellowship with other Christians, your pastor, your community?

Name something, anything that is good in your life... your heart can turn it into an idol.

How does it do this?

Two ways at least:

1. We have an incessant need for more. We want to move from the experience of relative good to ultimate good. Perfect happiness cannot be found in this world. Whenever we take something that is good and then seek from it ultimate good in this life, we have constructed an idol.
2. We begin to believe that our happiness depends on the good that we have received rather than on God alone. God gives something good and then we immediately fear that the good will be taken away. Of course, whenever good things are taken away from us, it is right to experience the pain of their loss. But idolatry begins to care more about the loss than continuing to wait upon God as the source of all that is good.

When it comes to these sorts of idols, we often need God to take the initiative to expose the idolatry.

I want to be careful here, not all suffering is God's exposing idolatry. God's purposes for suffering are very complex and multifaceted. And we often do not know precisely what those purposes are.

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But one purpose is to help expose our idols.

God is not being mean-spirited in this. He is tenaciously drawing us to Himself. And He is helping us to loosen our grip on this present life.

Now we are in a better place to recognize God's good hand of providence in Jacob's life.

5 And
 as they journeyed,
 a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around
 them,
 so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

When Jacob's sons slaughtered the men of Shechem, Jacob was afraid. As he had done before, he was running for his life.

God had promised to Jacob security. Peace and rest from his enemies. It is likely that Jacob's desire for security holds him back from taking leadership in the whole atrocity at Shechem.

His desire for security was good. But defending the honor of his daughter should have taken priority.

Now Jacob's sons have stirred up a hornet's nest.

You might think that God would want nothing to do with Jacob because he failed to be everything that he ought to have been. But that is not the way God works.

Instead of pushing Jacob away, God calls Jacob to remember His covenant promises and to come before him in worship.

And as Jacob gives priority to worship, and prepares himself for worship, God works to protect Jacob from his enemies.

God inflicts all of Jacob's enemies with terror.

There is a tremendous principle here. Make a priority of worship. No matter what you are going through. No matter what your struggles. As a matter of faith, make worship a priority. Many times I hear people say that they move

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away from God in times of struggle. It is far better to run to God. Worship is always good for the soul.

Not only does God's loving hand watch over us when we worship, but in our attempt to come before Him in worship we often find that we must make other sacrifices to make worship possible.

This struggle to make worship a priority often will expose our heart idols.

God was wise in making the Sabbath a commandment. Devoting one day in seven to resting from my regular life, and to private and public worship, has done much to expose the idols of my heart.

Laying aside, even good things, to keep the Sabbath is healthy.

Read Genesis 35:8.

8 And
 Deborah,
 Rebekah's nurse,
 died,
 and
 she was buried
 under an oak
 below Bethel.
 So he called its name Allon-bacuth.

At first glance, this verse seems entirely out of place. What does the death of Rebekah's nurse have to do with putting away idols?

This is the only mention of Deborah by name. Surely, Jacob loved Deborah, and her mention gives her honor. But more than honoring Deborah, Jacob weeps.

He calls the place Allon-bacuth.

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Allon-bacuth means Oak of weeping.

But for whom is Jacob weeping. It is possible that he is only weeping for Deborah. But it is more likely that the occasion of Deborah's death brings afresh to him the death of his own mother.

Rebekah and Jacob were close.

Rebekah loved Jacob. She conspired with Jacob to steal the blessing. She sends him away to save his life. But her expectation is that she would see Jacob again.

Rebekah and Jacob hoped to enjoy life together.

But instead, Rebekah dies before Jacob can see her again.

We do not know exactly when Rebekah dies, but she must have lived some time feeling the loss of the son she loved.

Jacob is most likely weeping for his mother as he weeps over Deborah.

Neither Rebekah nor Jacob got what they hoped for.

Was God getting them back for all their scheming?

I do not think so.

I believe He was doing just the opposite.

God was being gracious to deal with the hidden idols of their hearts.

I am making the assumption that Rebekah remained in the faith. But assuming that she did, what do you think might have been occurring in her heart as she waited for her son to return.

She most likely was doing her own grappling with God.

She would have asked, "Why is it taking so long for Jacob to return?"

She would have had to look to God to help her in her loneliness and loss.

We already have seen that Esau's rebellion thrust her into depression.

She would have questioned the goodness of God.

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And in this she would have been faced with a choice. Either she could curse God and die, like Job's wife encouraged. Or, she could continue to wait upon God, trusting in Him. She could find help in God submitting the fulfilment of her desires to God.

I am the optimist that wants to think that she died hoping in God. I am confident that her suffering was not the wrath of God, but rather His gracious love helping her to submit even her good desire to be reunited with her son to God's holy will.

And I believe God was doing something very similar in the heart of Jacob. The providence of God had kept Jacob from ever enjoying her company again. He was now weeping over that loss.

But that honest weeping does not lead Jacob to bitterness and mistrust. Instead, Jacob combines it with faith and joy.

Read Genesis 35:9-15.

- 9 God appeared to Jacob again,
when he came from Paddan-aram,
and
blessed him.
- 10 And
God said to him,
"Your name is Jacob;
no longer shall your name be called Jacob,
but
Israel shall be your name."
So
he called his name Israel.
- 11 And
God said to him,
"I am God Almighty:
be fruitful and multiply.

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12 A nation and a company of nations shall come
from you,
and
kings shall come from your own body.
The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac
I will give to you,
and
I will give the land
to your offspring after you."

13 Then
God went up from him
in the place where he had spoken with him.

14 And
Jacob set up a pillar
in the place where he had spoken with him,
a pillar of stone.
He poured out a drink offering on it
and
poured oil on it.

15 So
Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken
with him
Bethel.

In the midst of weeping, God renews His covenant promises.
And Jacob finds joy in them.

These promises are the same promises given to Abraham previously.
Jacob is mourning the loss of his mother and her nurse.
And in the season of his mourning, God reaffirms His covenant promises.
And Jacob chooses to trust in those promises.
He does not grip so tightly to the loss that He is no longer thankful to God.

Drink Offerings are often connected with the enjoyment of God's blessings in
the Land and combined with the oil are symbolic of joy and thankfulness.

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It is a wonderful thing to see how the Oak of Weeping and the joy of the Drink offering can be so close in the text of Scripture.

Jacob experiences much pain and loss.

But he continues to find his hope in the one true God.

The pain and loss are God's good means to free his heart from hidden idols.

God is teaching Jacob to be driven by the truth of His covenant love.

If Jacob did not have the continued assurance of the Covenant Promises, he would surely view God's providence differently.

The fears and the pains and the struggles would have consumed him.

What keeps him from descending into the pit of despair? Trust in the assurance of God's love to him.

What keeps him from abandoning his God in search of his own path to happiness? Those same covenant promises.

Even when you cannot possibly see the reason why God might withhold from you some desired blessing, trust in His love and faithfulness.

Even when your heart screams to you that God must hate you to allow you to experience your sorrows and disappointment, remember His covenant love most perfectly demonstrated in the death of Christ on the cross.

As you look at Jacob's life, one minute you can see God's hand of blessing. But in the next moment, you wonder why God allows him to experience so much suffering.

God is both good and wise in Jacob's life. He knows how to continue loving him while purging his heart from idols.

Our hearts are like onions. You peel back one layer only to find another. But God is faithful. He knows all the layers and He will not finish until He is finished destroying all of them.

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Putting away idols and preparing for true worship is the main work of redemption.

In your fight against idolatry remember these things:

1. Cultivate a sense of God's love toward you. Only as you see Him as good and the Giver, will you be able to surrender the things that matter most to you.
2. God calls you to worship to help you out of idolatry.
3. Searching your heart and putting away idols is necessary preparation for worship.
4. Trust that when you experience pain and loss that God is graciously working to purge your heart of idols.
5. The purging of your heart of idols prepares you for eternal glory.

May we be given daily grace from the Holy Spirit to pray with the psalmist:

Psalm 62:1-2 For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. ² He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.