

It's common for us to connect idolatry with worship. If we worship God, then we aren't committing idolatry. If we worship something else, then we are. In the Bible, this was often the case. People worshiped a physical idol, offering things like prayer or sacrifices to it. And even if we are thinking about idolatry today—things like money or a career—we still think of it as worship, someone who is totally focused on that one thing. And as a result, idolatry becomes an either-or. Either you worship God or you worship something else.

But the trouble with this is that it gives us an excuse for our own thoughts and decisions, especially when times are difficult. As long as I worship God, then I'm not *really* committing idolatry. As long as I go to church or read the Bible or pray regularly, then I'm worshipping God and nothing else. God is first in my life, so I don't struggle with idolatry. But idolatry isn't about worship, at least not only worship. Idolatry has to do with trust, a trust in something other than God. Even if I worship God and say that I believe in Him, even if I say that I trust Him and put Him first, it's still very tempting to put our trust in something else when times are tough. Idolatry is something always much closer than we imagine it to be.

Israel in our Old Testament reading faced some serious threats. Assyria in the east was growing in power. And over and over, Israel heard news of the approaching Assyrian armies. Nation after nation fell before them. And it seemed like only a matter of time before they would reach Israel. The Lord had even told them through the prophet Isaiah that this would happen. Because they had turned away from the Lord, God told them clearly that Assyria would overrun them. Soon, they too would suffer the same fate as the other nations, because they had sinned against the Lord.

God told them these things, of course, to wake them up, to make them repent. Turn away from your sins! Turn towards the Lord! Why will you die, O Israel? But Israel didn't listen. Israel wanted to go their own way. Instead of turning toward God in the midst of their troubles, they looked for help somewhere else. A great army was on the march, so why not find some allies to protect them? So they tried to find alliances with other nations. The northern kingdom made an alliance with Damascus. The southern kingdom tried on a few occasions to make an alliance with Egypt. As long as they had allies, then surely they would survive the coming invasion. And kings after the days of Isaiah would do the same thing. Build up the army! Make allies! Strengthen the defenses! Get ready for this coming war! That's the way we will get through it.

But what made it worse in the southern kingdom, in Jerusalem especially, was that they still claimed to worship the Lord. We have the temple! God is with us! Surely, we are His people, so He wouldn't send us away. God is here in the city, so as long as we make the right preparations, we won't fail. God will save us and drive these Assyrians away. There's no need to worry!

But that's the trouble. Israel wasn't trusting in God. If they had trusted in Him, they would have turned back toward Him and away from their sins. But they didn't trust Him, so they looked for help from somewhere else. They looked for help in alliances, help in armies, help in walls, help even in the temple itself, rather than looking to the Lord. By doing this, they fell into idolatry, trusting in something else more than God.

Christians, when you are facing trouble, where do you turn? Do you turn to God? Or do you turn to something else? And maybe more to the point, do you turn to God *first* for that help? Let me use some examples so that you can see what I mean. Our nation is suffering from all kinds of political problems. There are riots in the streets. People are attacking one another constantly. We have never been more divided in recent history than we are today. And I don't

think anyone would argue with that, even here in North Dakota. So how do we deal with it? Where do we turn? Do we look for political solutions, like getting the wrong people out, getting the right people in, more police, less government, or whatever the solution seems to be? In other words, do we look to the world to fix the mess we're in, hoping that we'll find a way out somehow? Or do we turn towards the Lord who is the Lord of all, trusting in Him to lead us through all evil? Do you turn towards Him, praying for peace and asking Him to take care of you and others in this time of trouble? Where do you turn *first*?

Let me use another example. We are facing a major economic crisis. The government has printed trillions of dollars in an effort to support our struggling economy. You can't do something like that and expect that there will never be any problems. Inflation *will* happen. We're seeing it happen already with things like lumber and gas prices. So where do you turn, especially when the dollar is losing ground? Do you turn to the Lord, trusting in Him to provide for all your needs of the body? After all, if He can feed the birds of the air, He can certainly feed you. Or do you turn to something else? Your own job, your own investments, your own two hands, or whatever it might be? Where do you turn *first*?

One more example. Health issues continue to be a major concern for many people. The whole previous year has been focused on them. But when you're dealing with these health issues, where do you turn for help? I recognize that there are different opinions on this, and that's fine, but it's deeply troubling to see things like the state health department saying that the vaccine is the way to get our "lives back to normal," as if there was no other way. Do we turn to things like medicines or vaccines or doctors as the way to "fix" us, as the way to solving health problems? Or do we turn to God who gives health, either by using these things or without using them? God certainly can and does use our healthcare systems, but in our rush to go to the hospital, do we forget to pray? Where do you turn *first*?

The trouble with idolatry isn't so much that we ignore God. The trouble with idolatry is that, either intentionally or unintentionally, we push Him out of some aspect of our lives. When facing troubles, it's easy to turn to worldly solutions, thinking that they will help us because they seem so close or so powerful. We might, intentionally or unintentionally, put other things *first* and put our trust and hopes in them, even while calling on God to bless them afterward. Idolatry isn't so much about ignoring God as it is making Him the *second* thing we turn to in trouble.

But the Lord calls to us to trust in Him above all things, to turn to Him first before all things. The Lord reigns over everything, no matter what it may be. The Lord Himself says in our reading: "To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?" Because who is like God? Who can help like God can? No one. He goes on to say: "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?" In other words, look up in the night sky and look at all the stars. "He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing." The stars of heaven answer to the call of the Lord. He gives them all of their names. If the Lord who rules the universe, which is far bigger than we can even imagine, commands the stars and keeps them in order, what on earth will compare with Him? Why would we turn to anything else for help, when the Creator of all things is at hand?

Worldly things may seem so strong, but they will fail and pass away. But the Lord "does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable." Though the things of this world fail, the Lord does not fail. He doesn't grow tired. There is nothing beyond His ability. "Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted." The strength and energy of youth will come to an end, but the strength of the Lord never ends. He will give strength to the weak.

He will raise up the weary. He will provide for those who have lost everything. He will give peace to the troubled. He will save the lives of those who call on Him. “They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

Jesus promises us this help even in the midst of sorrow. He tells us: “You have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” Even if things are hard, even if life is full of trouble, Jesus comes to us, and we can rejoice in Him. He gives us the Spirit to be with us. He gives us Himself to strengthen us. He brings us to the Father to give us joy. He shows us, beyond all doubt, that the Lord is our help in every trouble.

So when faced with life’s troubles, Christians, turn to the Lord. Call on Him, not as an afterthought, not after you have done something else, but call on Him first, knowing that the Lord who reigns over all things cares for you. The One who created the stars knows you by name. The One who is from everlasting made you. He will not forget. He will not be powerless to help. The Lord is the one who is over all. So come to Him, bringing all your troubles in prayer, and He will never fail to help you.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, You are our help in every need and have promised to be with us always. Bring us out of all of our troubles, because You alone are the Savior of Your people; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.