

Isaiah 41 – The Problem

I wonder what comes to mind when you think of idols. Probably images of statues or figurines. Something made or carved that you can see. Probably something that is ancient history only part of other cultures.

Idols don't have to be actual images or something physical.

An idol is any substitute for God. On this definition almost anything can be an idol. Even something good given by God we can turn into an idol.

John Calvin said that the human heart is a 24 hour 7 day a week idol factory.

It is more than an ancient problem or a problem they have in other cultures. It is a problem for everyone. It is a problem for Christians.

We tend to think it is a problem out there when it is a problem inside everyone of us.

In fact in the Bible there is no more serious charge than that of idolatry. It is seen as the main indicator of those who don't know God.

This is the problem that is diagnosed by Isaiah in Isaiah 41.

Isaiah 41 reminds us that God alone is to be worshipped because he alone is in control and instead of turning to idols we should trust him and find security.

Isaiah is speaking to God people. Things aren't the way God said they would be for them. However they have brought this on themselves by their rebellion. They had been surrounded and attacked by another nation – Assyria.

If things weren't bad enough Isaiah predicted that in the future Israel would go out of their land, the temple would be destroyed and the people would be carried off into captivity in Babylon. Isaiah 39 ends on this depressing note. Things are going from bad to worse.

Israel had failed God and paid heavily for it. They are defeated, bitter, disillusioned. They think God has failed them. The whole world has been shattered. They thought God had abandoned them.

He addresses the question that will be at the forefront of the exiles' minds: *Is the exile the end of the line for the Lord's people? Has God abandoned his people? Is this the end of the road for them?*

Last week. Comfort from God. This week why? What is the problem?

1. God directs history

Read: 1-2

Isaiah's message isn't just for God's people the Israelites. It is for the other nations as well. Referred to here as 'islands.' It is a courtroom scene. God is calling the nations in to face some questions so a decision can be made. The word judgement is the place of decision.

But before God they have nothing to say.

Read: 2-4

Notice who does all the action. **"HE"** There is another person he refers to. So Isaiah is saying God directs history including the conquerors of the world. He is actively involved moment by moment.

God didn't set the world up and let the forces of nature keep it running. He is the force of nature.

Do things just happen? Or is God at work? Easy to say about things that happen:- Fortunate, good luck,

We are too easily surprised by events. We too easily live like we are in control of our lives.

Isaiah turns to the response of the nations. The response of the nations to life.

2. Idol producing humanity

Read: 5-7

People long for stability in the middle of the battles of life. But their blindness leaves them with no resource but to make their own gods to help them. They cheer one another up with their powerless man made answers.

“When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing; they believe in anything.” GK Chesterton
They join together and to construct their own meanings and myths.

Read: 21-24

Pagan gods claimed to reveal truth and predict the future. God is taking them to court for false advertising. He is saying to every rival god, “Okay, you have the floor. Go ahead and embarrass me. I dare you. Don’t just sit there. Do something, do anything, shock us. Here’s your chance to prove that you’re not dead. He makes the statement idols are nothing.

Idolatry is anything in my life that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone.

It has a controlling position in my life so that it moves and attracts so easily that I give my time, attention, energy and my money to it effortlessly. We simply go to something or someone to feel at peace. We either look to God or something else, whether it is achievement, relationships, family, status, popularity, a hobby, or morality to make us feel secure, significant and socially fit in.

We treasure our idols more than we love God.

How can we find out what are our idols? Tim Keller helps us in his book ‘Counterfeit Gods.’

He quotes one person who says:- “Your religion is what you do with your solitude.” The true god our your heart is what you thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention. What do you enjoy daydreaming about? What occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about?

Another way to discern your heart’s true love is to look at how you spend your money. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.” Your money flows effortlessly towards your heart’s greatest love.

A third way to discern your idols work best for those who have professed a faith in God. You may regularly go to church. Know theology. Try hard to obey God. However what is your real daily functional saviour? What you really living for, what is your real not professed – god? A good way to discern this is how you respond to unanswered prayer. When you pray and when for something and don’t get it and respond with explosive anger or despair, then you may have found your real god.

A final test he says works for everyone. Look at your most uncontrollable emotions. If you are angry ask, “Is there something here too important to me, something I must have at all costs?”

What are your idols? Here’s some questions to help you expose your idols:-

What do you worry about? What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live?

What do I use to comfort myself when go bad or get difficult?

What do I do to cope? What are my release valves? What do I do to feel better?

What preoccupies me? What do I daydream about? Of what am I the proudest?

For what do I want to be know? What do I talk about the most? What prayer, unanswered would make me seriously think about turning away from God? What would really make me happy?What is my hope for the future?

When confronted with life we tend to turn to other things apart from God. We need to be reminded that God is with us and in the thick of life we should turn to him.

3. God alone provides security

Read: 8-10

Notice again who is takes all the action. He chooses. He calls. He is committed.

The word ‘but’ alerts us to a contrast. The nations prop us their helpless, homemade saviours but God who holds the world together strengthens.

He wants Israel to know. Know his help, his strength, his presence, his perfect support.

As his servants we are his responsibility. He will act for us. I am not like idols he is saying I will do something for you. I will strengthen you.

Read vv.14-16

Isaiah is stacking up reason upon reason for us to live for him. He is saying God will use us to achieve his plans in the world. This is human weakness winning over opposition.

This is weak Christians achieving glory for God. The church is all its dysfunctions, and complaints, and sin bringing about the purposes of God. Now that's a miracle. Exactly as what happened in the death of Jesus.

Read vv.17-20

God is a life giving person.

Are you needy? Or are we all perfectly complete? God is refreshment if you know you need it.

Jesus said: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scriptures has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" John 7: 37,38

Water poured out symbolises never ending salvation. The Bible finishes with Revelation 22 which talks about a 'river of life.'

J.I. Packer in his book 'Knowing God' on page 45 says:-

"What matters...is not the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it – the fact that **he knows me**. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends in his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him, because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters.

This is momentous knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort – the sort of comfort that energises, be it said, not enervates – in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love, and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench his determination to bless me."

Have you made yourself what you are? Or are you living proof of what can do?

What ever you give credit to for what you are or have is your idol?

What ever you think gives you standing with God apart from him is you idol?

Because you have substituted God with another you need to repent. Say sorry and change.

Go into a quiet room sometime at a quiet part of the day weep and say sorry. Look to Jesus alone for forgiveness and help. Give up your idols and delight in God alone. God in Jesus is all you need.