

Listen to Me
 Isaiah 46-47
 Michael Felkins
 Grand Avenue Baptist Church
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Brothers and sisters, idolatry is a dangerous problem for us. That is why the danger of idolatry and the worship of false gods is a major theme and problem in Scripture. From the beginning of Scripture to the end, we are charged not to worship false gods, and yet, over and over, we find ourselves stumbling and sometimes running to idols of our own invention.

Why is it that we, as humans, continue to succumb to the danger of idolatry? Two things: First, we are, by nature, worshippers. We are hardwired to worship, love, trust, and serve something or someone. In the Garden, God created us to worship Him. Second, and here is our problem, we are sinners. Not long after we were created in the Garden, Adam and Eve sinned, and that sin has warped our ability to worship God rightly.

We often think that idolatry is somehow only limited to ancient people in the Old Testament, and we are somehow more sophisticated, so we are not in danger of false gods and idolatry. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 5:21:

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

Bottom line: idols/false gods are the biggest threat to your life. The prophet Bob Dylan tells us,

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed

You're gonna have to serve somebody

It may be the devil or it may be the Lord

But you're gonna have to serve somebody¹

The thing is, if we will not worship Jesus, then we will create something or find someone or something to worship because we are hard-wired to worship.

Now, let's look at Isaiah 46-47, and let me set our text up. I want to set the text up because it will give you some mental hooks to hang our points on as we work through the text. FYI: we are going to spend most of our time in Isaiah 46.

First, in these two chapters, God contrasts Himself with the idols of Babylonian culture.

Second: In Isaiah 46, God is speaking directly to us. God is always speaking directly to us, but the difference is that Isaiah is not saying, *“Thus says the Lord.”* Instead, God is speaking directly to us, saying, *“Listen to me.”* Over and over, He will call His people to listen to Him.

Third: Isaiah 46 is written in a Jewish circular style of argument. God will make His point, move on to a contrasting point and then come back to His original argument and say it in a different way. God makes His point, and then He spirals out as He unpacks the meaning further.

This circular style is very effective for us because we are slow to get to the point. We are like the people in v. 12, *“Stubborn of heart.”* We are people who must be told what to do over and over and in different ways until we get it and thus believe in God.

Fourth: Let me set the historical scene. Judah had been exiled to the city of Babylon. Babylon was the center of the known world at that time. It was the leading city-state in the world. It was like New York, London, Moscow, and Beijing all rolled into one.

¹ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bobdylan/gottaservesomebody.html>.

God's people were exiled to Babylon, and this was because of their sin against God. So, as they were brought into the city, they were marched along the *Processional Way*, where everyone could see their defeated foes. Now, the pavement of the *Processional Way* was paved with three-and-a-half-foot square paver stones. Each stone had a beveled edge with the words "*To the honor of Marduk*" inscribed on it. So, every step was a reminder that they were defeated and hopelessly trapped in a city filled with idols and idolatry, so they should just give up and worship Babylon's false gods.

God's people were in danger of giving in to idolatry. They were thinking, "*Why even try? God is not with us. He can't defeat these gods. Let's just give up and go along with the crowd.*"

That is not the message God gives them in Isaiah 46 & 47. God's message to them is that even this exile and their suffering are part of His plan. He is sovereign over this, so they need to listen to Him and trust in Him because Babylon will be destroyed.

Here is our main point: *We need to listen to Jesus because He is God, and there is no other. He made us, and He carries us all the way home.*

I. Listen to Me: Your idols cannot carry you (Isaiah 46:1-2, 5-7)

*Bel bows down; Nebo stoops;
their idols are on beasts and livestock;
these things you carry are borne
as burdens on weary beasts.*

²*They stoop; they bow down together;
they cannot save the burden,
but themselves go into captivity.*

Bel is another name for Marduk, the chief god of Babylon. Nebo was his son, who was the secretary for the gods. At the beginning of every new year, Bel declared everything that was going to happen to Nebo. Nebo would write it down and deliver it to the kings and the people like some kind of pagan farmer's almanac.

Then, in a big festival, they would take these huge idols of Bel and Nebo, load them on platforms on the backs of oxen, and they would parade them down the *Processional Way* to their shrine. God's people witnessed this every year. It had to wear on them and cause them to doubt. God's people were tempted to think these gods were great gods.

But in vv. 1-2, Yahweh begins to contrast Himself to these false gods. First, He said these gods were supposed to be the supreme gods of Babylon, yet they had to be carried into the city on the backs of beasts that couldn't even bear their weight. These idols were so heavy that the animals eventually collapsed. Finally, in v. 2, Yahweh says these false gods will eventually be carried into captivity.

Next, He contrasts Himself to those gods. Look in vv. 5-7:

⁵*"To whom will you liken me and make me equal,
and compare me, that we may be alike?"*

⁶*Those who lavish gold from the purse,
and weigh out silver in the scales,
hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;
then they fall down and worship!*

⁷*They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it,
they set it in its place, and it stands there;
it cannot move from its place.*

*If one cries to it, it does not answer
or save him from his trouble.*

In v. 5, Yahweh asks: *Who is My equal? To whom will you compare Me?* All of these false gods that you think are so great were created by the Babylonians. They had their beginning when someone raided their purse and piggy bank and pulled out some gold or silver. Then they hired someone to fashion it into an image. Then this idol had to be carried to its appointed place. It can't move. It can't speak. It can't walk. These idols can't hear or speak. They can't walk, much less carry any burdens that they have. They cannot help you when you are in trouble.

How does this apply to us today? Well, we need to ask: *What is an idol in our day?* There is probably not any danger you will bow down to Bel or Nebo. So, what is an idol for us?

An idol or a false god is something to which we give ultimate allegiance. It is often something in which we find hope or satisfaction, or value. Often, an idol is a good thing in our lives that becomes an ultimate thing. We can tell it is the ultimate thing because we will organize our lives around it. Our hearts will be wrapped around this thing or person because of the satisfaction it, or he or she promises us.

So, here is the deal. Idols always have their origin in our hearts. It is there that they thrive. They can have a physical representation, but all idols ultimately reign in our hearts.

So, what are some of the idols we struggle with in 21st-century America and specifically in Ames? As I said, we are not tempted to bow down to Bel and Nebo, but even Bel and Nebo held out something of value like power, prestige, honor, wealth, identity, community, and control to the people. You see, the idols Bel and Nebo were simply physical manifestations of what the leaders and people organized their hearts and lives around.

So, here is the question: *What are we tempted to worship in our day and age?* Let's go through a short list.

What about the idol of *politics and government*? We just came through an election cycle. Did your politician get elected? What promise did he or she make that you hoped would change the course of our city, state, or nation? Did that person deliver for you? Will he or she carry you through to the next election? If he/she didn't or didn't, you're going to have to prop up your idol for the next election.

Many these days are worshipping at the altar of *identity* or what Carl Truman calls the *Modern Self*. *Identity* has always been an idol for people, but it is now the chief of the false gods. The god of the *modern self* emphasizes the authority of our *inner feelings* and *the centrality of our sexual desires* that grow out of our *inner feelings*. The *modern self* says that our *inner feelings* are who we truly are and what is most important about us. "You be you" is the mantra of the *modern self*.

The Modern Self says that it does not matter how you were created because your *inner feelings* tell you who you truly are. Therefore, because your *inner feelings* reign. Carl Truman, in his book *Strange New World*, says:

*"Our culture is one marked by plastic people who believe they make and remake themselves at will . . . [they are] plastic people living in a liquid world."*²

The danger of these *personal inner feelings* is that they are no longer inner and personal. The modern self is a political movement called *identity politics*. Its mission is the same as *The Dark Lord, Sauron*, in *Lord of the Rings*. It wants to dominate all life. Beware the subtleties of this false god.

Another idol that has a lot of influence today is *acceptance and affirmation*. It is good to be loved by others and well thought of, but if what others think of you is more important than what God thinks of you, then you have an idol of acceptance in your life. If someone says a cross word to you, and you replay it over and over, and it ruins your day, then acceptance and affirmation are your idols.

Here is another way this idol works in the lives of people today: Do you find yourself constantly checking social media to see if someone has liked or commented on your post? Does it make your day when you get lots of likes? Does it ruin your day when someone disagrees with you or trashes you on social media? If this is so, then your idol is affirmation and acceptance.

² Carl Truman, *Strange New World*, 111-112.

What about the idol of control? We know we have built this idol in our hearts when our day does not go as planned or someone has dropped the ball, and we get bent all out of shape. Do you ever plan something only to see your plans trashed, and then you get angry or frustrated and begin to blame others for their shortcomings?

There are thousands of other things that can be idols in our lives, *education, power, wealth, comfort, and status*, just to name a few more.

Remember, idols hold out hope for us. Bottom line: An idol is anything that we build our lives upon that is not Jesus Christ.

We do not have to have gold dust and wood chips on the floors of our homes to have an idol in our hearts. All we have to do is hope that our idol will make us happy or change our lives or give us what we desire most.

Friends, idols cannot *deliver* for you. They will always *disappoint* you, and they will eventually *destroy* you. Bottom line: All who cling to idols will eventually be *destroyed*.

But God says, LISTEN TO ME: *I am God, and I do not have to be carried, elected, charged, supported, refilled, rebuilt, and reinforced*. I give you life, but your idols, promise life and only deliver death.

II. Listen to Me: I will carry you (Isaiah 46:3-4, 8-11)

Look at vv. 3-4:

³ *“Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me
from before your birth,
carried from the womb;
⁴ even to your old age I am he,
and to gray hairs I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save.*

After Yahweh explains that idols cannot save His people, He reminds His people that only He can save them. He says in v. 3, *“Listen to me.”*

Notice how he refers to them. He called them the *“House of Jacob”* and the *“House of Israel.”* This is an ancient name for God’s people.

Remember Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Israel? Jacob was in exile in the land of the Chaldeans because he sinned against his brother Esau. But all the time Jacob was in Chaldea, God was taking care of him even when Jacob didn’t know it. Later God called him back to the Promised Land.

It was when he was making his way back home that he realized God had never left him. In fact, God has been carrying him the whole time.

God was reminding Judah that although they were in exile because of their sin, He had been carrying them the whole time. Their exile in Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans, was no accident. Just like God carried Jacob from before the time he was born, and he carried him until he was old and gray, Yahweh would carry His people back home.

Have you ever felt like Jacob and the people of Israel? It seems like your life has been wrecked, and God has abandoned you. It seems like you are all alone, and no one is helping you carry your burden. Perhaps you feel like an exile because of your sin.

It is important that you humble yourself before Him and trust Him. It is important that trust in the burden-bearing God who saves. It is important that you understand that God is carrying you and will carry you even to old age. He will never leave you or forsake you, and *that is a comforting thought*.

We must do what the Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 5:7 says:

Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.

Listen to me. It's not over after we cast all of our cares on Jesus. We must keep believing. We have an enemy who will try to destroy our faith in Jesus.

Things may still be hard and seem dark. Our emotions may be all over the map, but when this happens, we must do what vv. 8-11 says:

⁸ *"Remember this and stand firm,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
⁹ remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'
¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.*

Yahweh destroyed the counsel of the false gods. Bel and Nebo knew nothing. God was the One who wrote how things were going to end, and He wrote it from the very beginning. So, He called His people to look back at all He had done and then to look forward to seeing what He would do. In v. 11, God says He is the one who called a bird a bird of prey from the east to destroy Babylon.

What was *the bird of prey* named? (Cyrus the Great) Then at the end of v. 11, He says,

*"[Listen to me] . . . I have spoken,
I will bring it to pass. I will do it."*

Likewise, God calls us to look back at what He has done and then look forward to what He will do. What has God done, and what will He do? Here it is: From the very beginning, God said the *Seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head, but he will bruise His heel*. This is the promise of our salvation. God has done it, and He will complete it.

When the dark times come, and they will. We must remember who God is. We must remember what He has done in the past to save His people. We must stand firm in our faith. We must remember God has determined what will happen in the end, and He determined that end from the very beginning.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are sojourners exiled in this broken world. Heaven is our home, and our Savior is leading us to the home. On our journey together, He calls us to stand firm, remember who our Savior is and that there is none like our God. He warns us not to be fooled and turn to the false gods of our culture. This leads us to our third point.

III. Listen to Me: Salvation is only found in Zion (Isaiah 46:12-13)

¹² *"Listen to me, you stubborn of heart,
you who are far from righteousness:
¹³ I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off,
and my salvation will not delay;
I will put salvation in Zion,
for Israel my glory."*

In these two verses, Yahweh tells us how he relates to sinners. He knows we are stubborn of heart. In other words, we don't listen well. As a result, we are far from being right with Him.

Then notice what God does in v. 13. He comes near to us. He brings His righteousness to us. Verse 13 ultimately points us to Jesus. The salvation He put in Zion is the Son of God, who hung on a Roman cross for our sin. Christ came in the flesh, wholly God and wholly man. He came, and He obeyed the Law of God for us because we couldn't and wouldn't.

Then He went to the cross and bore the burden of our sin. It was on the cross that we see how God demonstrated His righteousness when Jesus died in our place and for our sins. By His death, He brought us who were far off from righteousness to God.

And then we see at the end of v. 13 that God did all of this for His glory. It was for His glory that Jesus died for sinners to make us righteous.

Jesus carried us to God by His death on the cross, even when we did not even know we needed carrying. He bore our burden of sin to God even before we knew we needed Him. As Romans 5:8 says:

*But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners,
Christ died for us.*

This is the glory of God displayed in the gospel, the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ died for sinners.

IV. Listen to Me: Babylon, the mother of idols, is doomed (Is. 47:1-15)

Isaiah 47 is a poem about the destruction of Babylon. Here is the deal. This was about the literal destruction of Babylon. However, what we need to know is that Babylon is also *representative* of every culture and political entity that sets itself up as the ultimate savior of mankind.

Isaiah 47 is what will happen to every idolatrous culture and person who holds tightly to their false gods. God was warning those who worshipped idols what was going to happen to them. Look in Isaiah 47:8, 10-11 to listen to him:

*Now therefore hear this [Listen to me],
you lover of pleasures, who sit securely,
who say in your heart, "I am,
and there is no one besides me . . .
¹⁰ You felt secure in your wickedness;
you said, "No one sees me";
your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray,
and you said in your heart,
"I am, and there is no one besides me."
¹¹ But evil shall come upon you,
which you will not know how to charm away;
disaster shall fall upon you,
for which you will not be able to atone;
and ruin shall come upon you suddenly,
of which you know nothing.*

Babylon and all who live for Babylon are doomed. As Revelation 18:2 says,

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!

God will one day pour out His wrath on all who love and live for Babylon and its idols. There is no refuge from God's wrath in Babylon. As one pastor once said, *"There is no refuge from Christ, but there is refuge in Christ.*

Conclusion:

Friend, if you are living in Babylon, listen to me, flee that city, for it is doomed. Flee to Jesus while there is time. Call on Jesus to save you while you can.

If you are a Christian, the question is, how should we live in the Babylon of our day? Here's one example. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, was sailing to the New World to be an evangelist to the colonists and Native Americans in 1735. He believed in God – in a way. He had what we might call "*head knowledge*," but he did not have any "*heart knowledge*."

As he was sailing from England to America, on board his ship was a group of Christians from Germany. He'd never met people like them before. One day they had a worship service out on the deck when suddenly, a storm came out of nowhere.

Wesley later wrote in his journal, "A terrible screaming began among the English, but the Germans looked up and without intermission calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward, 'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not your women and children afraid?' He replied mildly, 'No; our women and children are not afraid to die.'"

Wesley realized they knew God in a way that he did not. God used their calm faith right in the middle of the madness to open Wesley's eyes to the real Jesus.

Friends, right here in the madness of our times, let's calmly sing on about the glory of our Savior. Let's trust in the Savior who carries us when we are in trouble.

We are going to close by singing *We will Feast in the House of Zion*. Listen to v. 2:

*In the dark of night before the dawn,
My soul be not afraid.
For the promised morning, o how long!
O God of Jacob be my strength.*

This is how we live in this wicked culture as the storm rages all around. As we sing like this, when all seems to be falling apart, others will be drawn to our hope in Christ.