

# Idolatry

*Worship Gone Wrong*

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## Defining Idolatry

*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. - 1 Corinthians 10:13-14*

What is *idolatry*? We know that the Bible strongly condemns idolatry, and you are probably familiar with what the Ten Commandments say about it (Exodus 20:3-5). Still, what *is* idolatry. What does the word mean? What practices can be considered idolatry?

- Take a minute and consider how you would define *idolatry* right now. See if you can reduce it to a sentence or two.

### Hebrew Words for Idols

There are numerous terms used to describe idols. The Greek word is pretty straightforward. It is the word *eidolon* – the word we get *idol* from. It means an image of something not actually visible. Hebrew has a handful of words that are part of the semantic domain of an idol. This is not an exhaustive list.

1. Images (גִּלְוָלִים, *giluwliym*, always appears in the plural): generally just used to refer to any cultic object (Lev 26:30, 1 Kgs 15:12, 2 Kgs 17:12, Jer 50:2)
  2. Idol (אֵלִיל, *eliyl*): literally a worthless thing (Lev 19:4, Isa 31:7, Hab 2:18)
  3. Carved or graven image (פְּסֵל, *pesel*): something made or crafted (Exo 20:4, Deut 4:16, Judg 17:3)
  4. Empty thing (הֶבֶל, *hebel*): generally anything that lacks substance, but specifically used to refer to idols at times (Deut 32:21, 1 Kgs 16:13, Jer 10:8)
  5. Likeness (שִׁמְל, *semel*): a figure of an object (Deut 4:16, Ezek 8:5)
  6. Household gods (תְּרַפִּים, *terafim*, always appears in the plural): an old term for household deities, like ancestor worship perhaps (Gen 31:19, Jdg 18:14, 2 Kgs 23:24)
  7. Metal gods (אֱלֹהֵי מַסְכָּה, *elohiy masekah*): literally “covered gods” because the metal was plated on top of a wood form (Deut 7:16, 2 Kgs 17:16)
  8. False God (אֲצָב, *atzab*): a representation of a god, possibly originally a Philistine word (1 Sam 31:9, 2 Sam 5:21, Ps 106:38)
- What do all these terms have in common? Discuss **Psalm 115:4-8** in the context of describing the real nature of idols.

## **Idolatry: Worship Gone Wrong**

Here is a good working definition of an *idol*.

*An idol is anything in this world that is revered as being the presence or power of the divine or supernatural.*

While an idol can be an object of prayer, it doesn't have to be. It can also be a talisman, or a treasured item that "connects" you to something.

### **Is There a Biblical Theology of Idolatry?**

To find the answers to these questions, we need to develop a **Biblical Theology** of idolatry. Biblical theology asks the question, "What did the authors of the Scriptures believe?"

#### ***The Law of Moses***

First, let's look at what the Law of Moses has to say. Beside the Ten Commandments, what does the law say about idolatry?

- Explore the statements made in **Exodus 34:10-17**.

*Can idolatry co-exist with God's covenant?*

*What dangers exist if you are trying to both live in covenant with God and follow after idols?*

- Consider God's statements in **Leviticus 19:1-4**.

*What declaration is repeated three times in this passage?*

*Why is idolatry contrary to this repeated phrase?*

#### ***The History of Israel***

King David united the twelve tribes of Israel into a single state around 1000 BC. Eighty years later, it split into two successor kingdoms, with ten of the tribes forming a kingdom of Israel in the north around their capital of Samaria. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin formed a kingdom in the south around their capital of Jerusalem. In 722 BC, Samaria fell to the Assyrians. Jerusalem lasted until 586 BC when it was conquered by the Babylonians.

- Read **2 Kings 17:6-18**.

*Why did the Israelites get involved in idolatry?*

*The two golden calves mentioned in the text were built by the king Jeroboam I (r. 931-909 BC). If you read the passage (1 Kings 12:26-31), why did Jeroboam build these first idols?*

- Read **2 Kings 21:10-16**. So you know the background, King Manasseh (reigned 696-641 BC) and his son Amon filled Judah with idolatry, and as a result, Judah was condemned.

*Notice the reference to “the plumbline of the house of Ahab” (v 13). This is a reference to the condemnation of Israel, which was ruled by descendants of Ahab.*

*Why do you think Judah was judged by the same standard as Israel?*

- Read **2 Kings 23:24-27**.

*Why weren't Josiah's reforms (reigned 640-609 BC) enough to stop God's punishments?*

*Was Judah being punished for the sins of their kings?*

### **The Prophets**

Israel's prophets often waxed poetic about the issue of idolatry, which of course contradicted their work as oracles of Israel's God.

- Read **Isaiah 40:18-23**.

*How does Isaiah show the differences between idols and the true God, particularly in their origins?*

*Isaiah continues his comparison in verse 27-28, asking “Why do you say... ‘my way is hidden from the LORD’...? If people believed they could conceal their actions from God, how did that fit into their idolatry?”*

## **Idolatry: Worship Gone Wrong**

- Read **Jeremiah 10:6-11**.

*What are the characteristics of those who rely on the “instruction of idols”? (v 8)*

*What is the fate of all gods who did not create the heavens and the earth? (v 11) Why do you think Jeremiah made this point so explicitly?*

- Read **Ezekiel 14:1-11**.

*What problem existed with the elders who were asking Ezekiel for help?*

*Consider the ways that idolatry is described here. How is the idolater’s attitude described (v 7)?*

- Read **Ezekiel 36:22-32**.

*What is required in order for an idolater to be restored to a true relationship with God? (vv 25-27)*

*Why would God restore an idolater? (v 32)*

### ***The Writings***

The worship texts of the Old Testament continue the theme of the prophets, but they are less focused on punishment for idolatry and more on the realities that idolatry ignores.

- Consider **1 Chronicles 16:23-27, Psalm 96:1-6 and Psalm 97:6-7**.

*Does the author of these songs believe there are other gods?*

*These passages are what we call “transitional expressions.” They reflect the growing understanding among the Israelites at the time that their God was not just “one of the gods” (polytheism) or “chief of the gods” (henotheism) but the only true God (monotheism).*

### **The New Testament**

Surprisingly, the New Testament does not deal much with explicit idolatry. While it is taken as a given in the society the church lived in, idolatry is treated as something external to the church.

- Read **Acts 15:19-21, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, and 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.**  
*Why did the early church leaders not want believers to eat food that had been offered to idols?*

There is one explicit passage that does not use the term *idol* but speaks specifically to idolatry (Romans 1:18-32). This will be discussed later.

### **The Practical Dangers of Idolatry**

- Read **Psalm 135:13-18.**

*What do you think happens to those who worship false idols, drawing your conclusion from this text?*

### **What Can Become an Idol?**

- Read **2 Chronicles 11:15 and 2 Kings 18:4.**

*If goats, cows and snakes can become objects of worship, then what can't be an idol?*

- We should be careful not to think that idols are *only* images or statues. The Hebrew word *asherah* (sometimes translated “groves”) describes upright poles that were used as idols in local worship sites. *How could a wooden pole be an idol?*

## **Idolatry: Worship Gone Wrong**

*What is important is that we come to understand that idolatry is not about the type of object, but the fact that it is used to worship something other than the one true God.*

### ***What Happens When We Practice Idolatry?***

*“What people revere, they resemble – whether for ruin or restoration.” - G. K. Beale, **We Are What We Worship***

Using the description of mankind’s rejection of God, the Apostle Paul allows us to reverse-engineer the great problem of idolatry.

- Read **Romans 1:18-23**.

*There are a series of actions taken by idolatrous human beings. Read through the text and identify them. There are six specific actions. See if you can identify all of them.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 18)

2. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 21)

3. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 21)

4. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 21)

5. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 22)

6. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 23)

*Consider how idolatry suppresses truth. What are some of the ways this might happen? (v 18)*

*Does the fact that the power and divinity of God are invisible contribute to man’s desire to build idols? (v 20) Do you see a correlation here to what happened in Exodus 32:1-6?*

- Read **Romans 1:24-32**.



*Paul says that “God gave them [humans] up” (vv 24, 26, 28). This verb literally means to hand over. These are internal desires that result from idolatry, things that it fosters in us. List them here.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 24)
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 26)
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (v 28)

*What is the overarching theme or direction of the desires that Paul lists here?*

*The word “exchange” appears twice (vv 25, 26). Is there significance to the idea of idolatry resulting in us exchanging one thing for another?*

*Paul describes the actions of worshiping (sebazomai) and serving (latreuo) the creature (v 25). These two verbs were reserved for doing obeisance to the Roman emperor. What does this tell us about the real object of worship in idolatry? What are people really worshiping?*

*Let’s meditate on Paul’s conclusion (v 32). Is idolatry a sin that does not affect others?*

*Why would idolaters also lead others astray?*

### ***How Do We Protect Ourselves from Idolatry?***

Everyone likes convenient, easy 1-2-3 steps. These are great for doing things like assembling furniture, but when it comes to worship, there is no easy step-by-step manual. Instead, we must consider the object of our worship and our place in the universe.

- **Read Colossians 1:13-22.**

*Who is the true image of God?*

## **Idolatry: Worship Gone Wrong**

*Recall **Jeremiah 10:11** (page 4). Does he meet the qualification of a “true God” based on this text?*

*In the Romans passage, idolatry results in the “exchange” of a good thing for a selfish thing. How is the worship of Christ different?*

- **Read Colossians 3:1-17.**

*Compare this passage to Romans 1:18-32. List all the ways that this passage reverses the description of idolatry we read in Romans.*

- **Read 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:6.**

*In Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth as a temple for his worship. He places his image in the middle (Genesis 1:26-27). Notice that here in 2 Corinthians, Paul says the believer is being “transformed into the same image.”*

*Idolatry is worshiping ourselves really, according to Romans. Here Paul calls us images. Think about that. What does this mean about God’s intentions for mankind?*

*Why does Paul emphasize that he is not proclaiming or preaching something of his own?*

*If idolatry is darkness (Romans 1:21), what is the only answer to it?*