

## WHEN IDOLS TUG AT YOUR HEART

Ezekiel 8:1-12, 14:1-6

Most people today see themselves as too sophisticated to ever be guilty of idol worship or setting up physical representations of pagan idols in our churches, communities, schools, activities or even in our homes. What about in our hearts? Surely we would not do that either!

If we will simply look around our world, we can see many symbolic uses of pagan influences that are accepted as being part of our historical culture. We don't give a second thought to having a sports team named "the devils." Most people don't even realize that the logo of Starbucks is the goddess Astarte. Most people are not bothered by Disney movies having an obsession with witchcraft. We could also mention such things as Halloween, Christmas trees, Easter eggs, and totem poles used by the Boy Scouts. These symbols and related terminology are so ingrained in our world that hardly anyone sees any connection to the pagan Canaanite goddess Ashtoreth and Mother Nature.

Most of us would dismiss any concern about such symbolism and word usage as nonissues. There are a number of people who "rely" on their horoscope and some who might even visit a fortune teller. On the other hand, most people would have to admit that they trust in their bank accounts and insurance policies, they are caught up in materialism and we worship at the altar of our own pride and ego. There is a tendency to idolize mankind and the power of science to solve all our problems or we think that education is a cure to all the ills of society.

Because of idolatry and failure to follow the Lord's commandments in the conduct of their lives, both Israel and Judah suffered severe discipline, defeat, destruction and dispersion of their people. It was into such a situation and time that God called Ezekiel to provide spiritual insight as to why such devastation was happening to them and to point to a "way out."

### Viewing Your World with Spiritual Eyes – 8:1-4

<sup>1</sup> It came about in the sixth year, on the fifth day of the sixth month, as I was sitting in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord GOD fell on me there. <sup>2</sup> Then I looked, and behold, a likeness as the appearance of a man; from His loins and downward there was the appearance of fire, and from His loins and upward the appearance of brightness, like the appearance of glowing metal. <sup>3</sup> He stretched out the form of a hand and caught me by a lock of my head; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the seat of the idol of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy, was located. <sup>4</sup> And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the appearance which I saw in the plain. Ezekiel 8:1-4 (NASB95)

This vision of what was happening in Jerusalem came to Ezekiel about fourteen months after the initial vision that God had given him. This occasion of the elders of the Jews who were in exile coming to consult with Ezekiel was apparently immediately after Ezekiel had publically displayed a prophetic message by lying on his left side for 390 days for the number of years of the iniquity of the house of Israel and another 40 days on his right side for Judah. This had obviously gotten the attention of all the Jews who were in exile.

While the elders were in Ezekiel's house, he had another vision in which he initially saw some of the same scenes he had seen before. This time, something different happened and Ezekiel was transported (in spirit) to the Temple in Jerusalem. He recognized that he was in the Temple at the entrance to the north facing gate that lead into the inner court where a pedestal that had once held a statue of Mother Nature (Astarte) that had been set up by Manasseh as a rival to Jehovah some years ago. Some commentaries report that this was an image of Baal. This idol had been removed in one of the reformations (of Josiah) that followed the reign of Manasseh.

In spite of all the wickedness of the people and the rebellion that was happening as the

people rejected God, Ezekiel saw an appearance that was evidence that the glory of the God of Israel was still there in the Temple. It would be some time later that “the glory” would be removed.

### What Is Openly Displayed in Your Church? – 8:5-6

<sup>5</sup> Then He said to me, “Son of man, raise your eyes now toward the north.” So I raised my eyes toward the north, and behold, to the north of the altar gate was this idol of jealousy at the entrance. <sup>6</sup> And He said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations which the house of Israel are committing here, so that I would be far from My sanctuary? But yet you will see still greater abominations.” Ezekiel 8:5–6 (NASB95)

As Ezekiel looked around (at God’s direction) he saw the idol that had provoked God to jealousy (during the reign of Manasseh) had been returned to the pedestal at the entrance to the north gate. One obvious lesson is that those Jews who had not yet been carried off to Babylon had not learned anything from the two previous situations in which thousands of people were taken as captives to Babylon. They had also not learned anything from the displeasure that God had shown years earlier when Manasseh had originally erected such an idol in the Temple area.

Another lesson that may be applicable for us is that when the reformation of Josiah removed the statue of the idol the pedestal was allowed to remain. When we are in the process of removing sin or sinful practices from our lives, we should not allow any vestige of that sin to remain. There must be a ruthless removal of anything that could allow such a practice to regain control in our lives.

In verse six it was as if God could not believe what He was seeing as the Temple officials were offering sacrifices to this idol right there in the Temple where the glory of God was present. Allowing such abominations to occur would force a response from God to remove His glory from the place.

How does this scene apply to the church today? Are there church groups that allow things that God has called abominations to happen openly in their churches? One doesn’t have to have a degree in theology to recognize such things as embracing humanism, rejecting the authority of the Word of God, denying the Resurrection, ordaining homosexual ministers, sanctioning marriages of same-sex couples, accepting couples for membership who are “living together” and failure to speak out against abortion are a few such abominations that are examples that we know about. It should be no wonder that many such groups seem spiritually dead.

### What is Going on Behind the Scenes in Your Church? – 8:7-10

<sup>7</sup> Then He brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, a hole in the wall. <sup>8</sup> He said to me, “Son of man, now dig through the wall.” So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance. <sup>9</sup> And He said to me, “Go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here.” <sup>10</sup> So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts and detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around. Ezekiel 8:7–10 (NASB95)

In his vision Ezekiel was allowed to look into the living quarters or apartments of the priests who served in the Temple. While there was some evidence of idol worship in the Temple area so that all could see, there were a multitude of idolatrous practices actually happening where they lived.

If you want to know what a person is really trusting in and where he places his faith for living, just listen to what he or she says about themselves. What kinds of things influence their private thoughts and their internal struggles. If we find ourselves saying something like this, “I wanted to tell them this and that; however, I restrained myself and was very tactful,” then we are trusting in the way of the world but putting up a facade for the world to see.

If the primary focus of the church staff is to present the Sunday “worship time” so that it

is entertaining and will hold the people's attention rather than what will be the impact of the message on the lives of those who attend, then we should be examining what is carved on the walls of our minds that is influencing what we do and what we consider to be important.

We have seen too much in the past several decades of those in positions of responsibility in the traditional church who are unfaithful in their marriages, some who are addicted to pornography, and others who secretly live perverted lifestyles that prey on children and their vulnerabilities. Sometimes, those in ministry professions are driven by ego, fame and a desire to become rich.

### Do We Think God is Unaware? – 8:11-12

<sup>11</sup> Standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each man with his censer in his hand and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising. <sup>12</sup> Then He said to me, “Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.’ ” Ezekiel 8:11–12 (NASB95)

The leadership of Israel (the seventy elders of Israel) were not holding the priests accountable for failure to obey the first and second commandments. In fact they were participating in worshipping or following other gods also along with the priest. Their iniquity was all behind the public scenes (in the dark) while they were being careful of their public image. For such practices to make any sense or logic, they would have had to be thinking that God does not see and/or He does not care. They were obviously more concerned with their public image than by what God thought. This is a big mistake for anyone to make.

With an objective of being thorough, it is thought that what Ezekiel saw happening with these leaders of Israel was going on in “rooms of their hearts and minds.” If this were the case, then Ezekiel was being shown what God can and does see for every person on earth. What kind of detestable (to God) images do we have hanging on the walls of our minds? What bad philosophies and ideas and wrong principles are we supporting or burning incense to as an act of giving credibility to such things in the way we think, what we say and how we behave?

After Ezekiel saw these abominations happening in the Temple, in the apartments of the priests and in conjunction with the leadership of Israel that was left in Jerusalem, God also showed him ordinary people involved in pagan worship rituals such as the women of Israel crying for Tammuz a god of the Babylonians who descended into the underworld during winter which was an occasion for weeping. He would emerge in the spring and this was a reason for celebrating. He also saw a group of men worshipping the sun in front of the Temple altar in which they bowed down to the east which meant that they had turned their backs on the Temple of God.

Because of this widespread iniquity and pollution of the Temple and the land, God's glory was removed from the threshold of the Temple and Ezekiel saw this happening in this vision in which he was transported (in spirit) to Jerusalem. After this he “returned” to the group of exiles that were meeting in his house.

Additional prophecies came to Ezekiel regarding the fall of Jerusalem and the fate of their puppet king, Zedekiah. Word apparently had gotten around and was communicated to the elders of Israel who had not (as yet) been taken captive and sent into exile. They came to Babylon perhaps on business and to consult with Ezekiel. We pick up that meeting in Chapter 14.

### What Is So Wrong with Idols? – 14:1-5

<sup>1</sup> Then some elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. <sup>2</sup> And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, <sup>3</sup>

“Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all? <sup>4</sup> “Therefore speak to them and tell them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols, <sup>5</sup> in order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from Me through all their idols.”’ Ezekiel 14:1–5 (NASB95)

Not all commentaries agree regarding whether these elders were from among those in exile or from those who still remained in Jerusalem. In the earlier meeting with elders in Chapter 8, those were described as elder of Judah and these men (in Chapter 14) were said to be elders of Israel (that may or may not be significant). The question that God raised with Ezekiel regarding their mission to consult the council of God and the remedy offered would apply to either group and to all people in general.

The first thing we see in the word of the Lord that came to Ezekiel is that God looks past all the external things and goes right to the heart of the matter. God knew that these people had set up idols in their hearts even though they would have confessed that they believed in Jehovah God, the God of Israel. The issue was not so much belief in God but the addition of trust and reliance on other philosophies, little “g” gods, and other entities.

According to D. A. Carson in the *New Bible Commentary*,

“There is no indication that the elders did not have a belief in the God of Israel. Their problem was that they also had other gods. No one can serve two (or more) masters. There can be only one. Against the background of today’s pluralism it may seem attractive to keep our options open and acknowledge many gods. The truth faces us when we become more deeply involved in one religion and find that it is incompatible with the rest. For instance, if Christ is the true way to God (John 14:6–7) other ‘ways’ cannot be contemplated.”

The expression of what was in their hearts did manifest itself in that they had incorporated these idols and ideas into their lives. These stumbling blocks to being pleasing to God had become part of their culture and they just accepted these things that were offensive to God as part of being an Israelite.

We could ask the question “What difference does it make?” The answer that came from God to Ezekiel was that these people were very presumptuous to think that they should be able to ask anything of God while they were immersed in their sinful ways. There is a way out of this dilemma.

### What Is the Way Out? – 14:6

<sup>6</sup> “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Repent and turn away from your idols and turn your faces away from all your abominations. Ezekiel 14:6 (NASB95)

The starting point or the first step in “getting it right with God” is the same message that John the Baptist preached in the wilderness. Repent! If what we are doing is not working because it is not pleasing to God, then stop doing it! The word of God has this crucial advice in many places. One of the clearest statements in the Old Testament is from Micah 6:8

He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

The message that Ezekiel passed on to these men was easy enough to understand. Stop, turn away from or abandon the outward expressions of the iniquity in your lives and do not let yourself be tempted by anything that is an abomination to the Lord.

This advice from God is just as applicable to us today as it was to the people of Israel some twenty-five hundred years ago. Just as Solomon had advised the young men he was teaching about temptation, “don’t go there: don’t even look such things but run away from them.”