

Group Study Outline

Launching Questions

Have you ever witnessed an act of worship from another religion?

What did you think of it?

How would people in our culture react if you said publically, "I thought it was really stupid. Their god is made up and they are bowing to a piece of wood."?

In today's passage that's exactly God's verdict on the so-called gods out there...

Study questions

READ Isaiah 44:6-23

What is the challenge from God in v7?

Who is God telling us He is?

Has the truth that He's the only God really hit home with us?

What are the implications?

What about idols? (v9-11) What are they like?

[Be clear that your group understands what an idol is.]

What about those who make or worship idols?

Describe the picture in v12.

What is the impact of making this metal idol?

Why is that so ironic?

Describe the picture in v13-14.

What does the carpenter/lumberjack do with the wood?

Why is this so ridiculous?

What is the image in v20? Why is it so fitting a picture of idolatry?

As offensive as it is, does this description of idolatry ring true to you?

Compare the idols to God – if you can! (include v21-22)

What is the impact of hearing this stuff about God and idols?

We are told 3 things to do in response:

"Remember" (v21a)

- Why do we need to remember this stuff?
- How would it have helped Judah to remember this stuff going into exile?
- How does it help us?

"Return" (v22b)

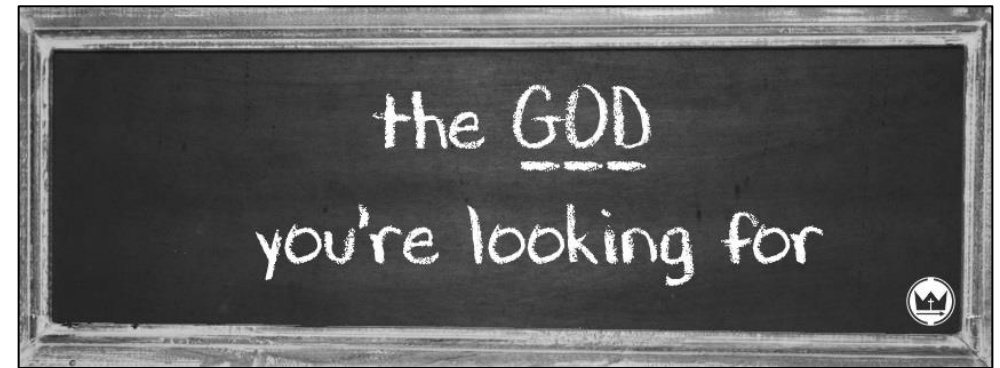
- Why do we need to return? We don't worship idols... do we?
- Are there things we need to turn away from?
- What hope is there for us if we do return?

"Sing" (23)

- Who should praise God in v23?
- Why does this stuff make you want to sing?

Pray

Isaiah 44:6-23



Isaiah at a glance

Isaiah prophesied at a time (approx. 740-680 BC) when God's people had rebelled against him and judgement was imminent in the form of exile to Babylon. But in chapters 40-55 Isaiah looks beyond this coming judgement to a time when Babylon itself will be destroyed, God's people will return to Jerusalem, and God's kingdom will draw people from all nations to relationships of peace with God and one another. In the process, Isaiah gives us a grand portrait of the great God who will do this – the God we are all looking for.

Where this passage fits in...

This passage is about the uniqueness of God and the stupidity of worshipping idols. This fits well with the overall theme of God's greatness. It also relates to the exile, both the reason for it and how Judah should behave during it.

The people were being exiled because of their failure to trust the Lord fully. Telling them to worship only Him (in particular the call to "return" in v22) fits with this need for repentance. Similarly, while away in exile they would be surrounded by idols, the gods of their more successful captors. It would be very tempting to be afraid or impressed with those idols and join in worshipping them. Isaiah is preparing them for what they will experience there.

Theme Sentence

The LORD is the only God and those who worship idols are fools.

Application

- Recognise the greatness of God compared to the stupidity of idols
- Remember these truths
- Return to the Lord by cutting all idolatry out of our lives.
- Sing praise God for His greatness

[NB]

Commentary

- 6-8 God makes Himself known very clearly. He is the LORD (His covenant name), the King of Israel (identified closely with His people), his redeemer (that is, the redeemer of Israel, showing He saves), the LORD of hosts (a powerful God with mighty armies). This is the God we are talking about. Not a weak and powerless statue who shows no loyalty nor strength for people. But the one who has promised to rescue and be with His people.

This God issues a challenge in v7. "Who is like me?" He invites people to make suggestions, knowing full well that they will fail. v6b and 8b make it clear that besides the LORD, there is no God. And if God knows no other god, then there *is* no other god!

The slightly confusing stuff in v7b-8a is saying that God's people can say what will happen in the future because He's already spoken to them about it. They are witnesses to His uniqueness. As often happens in Isaiah, the big proof that the LORD is the only God is how He speaks through His prophets and those words come true.

- 9-11 The natural outworking of God's uniqueness is that it is stupid to worship anybody else. In contrast to the LORD's witnesses (see note on v7b-8a), the idol's witnesses can't tell you anything! The idols are good for nothing.

But it is also those who fashion the idols who are nothing (v9). They are only human. One day they will be called to account and will be terrified and ashamed of what they have done. Idolatry is not just foolish but morally evil.

- 12 When the people of Judah went to Babylon they would have been very impressed with the statues of idols. Vast impressive metal structures, beautiful crafted figurines of mighty gods. To unmask the stupidity behind the impressive façade, Isaiah now takes us back to the process of making an idol.

Firstly we are taken to the blacksmith's yard. He heats up metal and bashes it with hammers, his muscles bulging. What a show of strength! And yet... all it does is make him tired and hungry! Far from helping him, already this idol is just a pain in the neck.

- 13-17 Next stop on the tour is the carpenter's workshop. He's measuring, marking, sanding and carving up wood into the shape of a man. He's making a little dolly for his doll's house! That's what idols and their shrines are. Silly little playthings.

To rewind even further, this man chose a tree and chopped it down. He knows where it came from; he planted it himself. Half the log becomes firewood for keeping warm, baking bread and having a barbecue. The other half becomes a god! He prays to it and asks it to deliver him. How utterly ridiculous.

- 18-20 The absurdity of idolatry is underlined in these verses. It was completely a matter of chance which half got burnt and which half got prayed to. At least the burnt half did the man some good! He got a burger out of it, making bread and cooking meat. Whereas worshipping idols is like feeding on ashes (v20). It is disgusting and does you no good. He might as well have burnt the 'holy' half to a crisp and eaten that for all the good it has done him.

The implication of these verses is that it is obvious that this is a ridiculous thing to do. Idolaters just cannot see it or understand. The reason is that "he has shut their eyes". Presumably the "he" here is God Himself. God judges the wrong they have done by blinding people to the stupidity of it. (For a similar treatment of God responding to idolatry by handing people over to it, see Romans 1:18-32.)

This blinding from God doesn't stop people being culpable for what they have done. What they are doing is "an abomination" (v19), something which provokes disgust and outrage. It is a clear violation of God's laws, which prevent making images of Him (if, to give them the benefit of the doubt, that's what they were doing) and from worshipping other gods (much more likely the case).

The thing they bow down to is just "a block of wood" (v19). It is "a lie" (v20). Anybody with eyes to see should recognise it as foolishness.

- 21 Having been shown the ridiculous picture of the idol factory, we return to God addressing His people directly. They are to "remember these things", presumably especially once they are in exile (see note on front page). The great promise is that God will not forget them!

We also are given here one of the big differences between the LORD and idols. "I formed you." Whereas idols are man-made, God made man. We are His and belong to Him as His servants.

- 22 The other big difference is that the LORD saves His people. You can ask a block of wood to deliver you all you want, but it couldn't even save itself from the axe. But the LORD takes away His people's sin like a puff of smoke.

He has redeemed His people so they should return to Him. Idolatry came from other nations but settled within Israel. That needs to stop. There is a call for repentance here which should protect us from using this chapter to simply point and laugh at others but to reflect on ourselves to see if we are truly putting no other gods before the LORD.

Having said this, the 'pointing and laughing' application is legitimate! Not all stupidity is sin, but all sin is stupid, and stupid things are funny. When we truly see idolatry for the folly that it is, we are less likely to engage in it. We are also less likely to fear the opposition (v8) when it is pointed out that the (Babylonian) emperor has no clothes on!

- 23 The response to God is one of praise. He's done it and redeemed them! Ironically, every tree of the forest is called to praise the LORD, yes even the ones that get chopped down and turned into idols...!