

THE FUTILITY OF IDOLATRY

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Idolatry begins by rejecting God (Isa. 44:1-6).
2. Idolatry leads to futile religion (Isa. 44:7-11).
3. Idolatry results in foolishness (Isa. 44:12-20).

Background Passage: Isaiah 44–46

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Idolatry is rebellion against God, born in the hearts of people when they worship parts of creation rather than the Creator.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Idolatry reveals the foolishness and brokenness of the human heart and the helplessness of anyone to be right with God. Christ came to reveal the one true God to all people and to conquer all forms of idolatry. All who have trusted in Christ have been given a new heart, one that can rightly love and worship God.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have come to know and taste the goodness of God through Christ, we proclaim the freedom that can be found in Him to all those enslaved by idols.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: Isaiah prophesied during a relatively good time for the Southern Kingdom of Judah, but the Northern Kingdom of Israel was in its death spiral leading to their eventual fall to Assyria. Still, idolatry remained a struggle for both kingdoms in varying degrees until both met their demise in exile as God's punishment. One place Isaiah addressed this issue was in a portion of his prophetic book aimed ahead to a time after the people had been deported to pagan lands. Through Isaiah, the Lord made the case that idols, whether local or abroad, were nothing but a dead distraction from the one true God.

EXPLAIN: Idolatry is a buzzword in the Christian faith. We sometimes have a decent understanding of this word but can't always point to where it occurs in our world. We don't generally see shrines or physical idols sold at our local store, yet idolatry is all around us.

DISCUSS: What are some of the most recognizable idols in American culture today? (power; money; sex; fame; keeping up with the Jones's; relationships; success)

TRANSITION: With Isaiah's fierce and direct ridicule of idolatry in the following passages, God's people were faced with a major decision. They could continue to seek idols as the object of their worship and walk in disobedience to God, or they could see the emptiness of idolatry and turn back to obey the Lord. This decision could not be taken lightly. Yet many were blind to the wicked ways of their sin. Only the work of the Lord would turn them back.

POINT 1

IDOLATRY BEGINS BY REJECTING GOD (ISA. 44:1-6).

1 “But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! **2** Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. **3** For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. **4** They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. **5** This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’s,’ another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, ‘The LORD’s,’ and name himself by the name of Israel.” **6** Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Isaiah 44:1-6** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-5** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the *Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

Despite the Israelites’ idolatry and rebellion, they remained God’s **chosen** people, and one day, God would bless and **increase** their numbers through the gift of His **Spirit**.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 6** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the *DDG*):

Because the Lord is the **only** God, our Redeemer, He alone is worthy of worship. Yet our idolatry, the worship of other “gods,” rejects His **unique** status as God.

DISCUSS: **Why do people, even believers, succumb to the temptation of idolatry?** (we have a sinful nature that prioritizes the self over God and others; though the knowledge of God is filtered throughout creation and ingrained in our creation by God, human beings suppress that knowledge in sin and choose other gods; like Jeroboam, we can find idolatry pragmatic for our purposes; idols of our choosing free us to fulfill our sinful desires)

TRANSITION: Though God comforted the Israelites in telling them they were His chosen people, He reminded them emphatically who He is—the only true God. All those who worship other gods and their idols will be put to shame. Idolatry is senseless, purposeless, and futile in all respects.

NOTES

JESHURUN

A poetic name for Israel, meaning “upright” (see also Deut. 32:15; 33:5,26). From Jacob, the “supplanter,” to Israel, “the fighter/struggler,” to Jeshurun, the “upright,” God’s chosen people will eventually be who He intended them to be—morally upright people who will faithfully follow Him.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-5 / Through His prophet Isaiah, God told His people that they had “transgressed against me. Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction and Israel to reviling” (Isa. 43:27-28). Because of Israel’s idolatry and rebellion, God pronounced judgment on them. But because they were His covenant people, whenever God pronounced judgment, He also provided a way of redemption through His grace.

In Isaiah 44:1, God called out Israel as the one **“whom I have chosen.”** The Lord had not completely rejected Israel. He still called them His own and had not abandoned them.¹ After declaring the nature of His relationship status with Israel, He further declared that He was also their creator. He had made them **“from the womb.”** From the very beginning, God had been present and active in the lives of the Israelites. God also reminded Israel that He was their helper and that they had no reason to fear. Even though they had rejected God for a time, He reiterated that He had chosen them.

God graciously promised to continue providing for the physical and spiritual thirst of His people. He would pour water on the land and pour His Spirit on future generations. They would grow in number, sprouting like **“willows,”** as people aligned and identified themselves with the Lord. Whether this meant Israelites becoming fully devoted to God or Gentiles turning to God, or more likely both, the Lord would increase their numbers and He would be their God.² They would belong to Him, sealed with His name. This is possible because of the pouring out of God’s Spirit.

VERSE 6 / Next, God declared through Isaiah who He is in explicit terms. Verse 6 reveals seven different titles and characteristics about God.

First, Isaiah described God as **“the LORD.”** In Hebrew, this is the name YHWH, written out as Yahweh. This name holds a holy

weight. The name Yahweh is difficult to translate. Roughly stated, Yahweh means “I AM WHO I AM” (see Ex. 3:14-15). So the Lord is the “I AM,” the covenant God foundational for all existence.

Second, Isaiah called God **“the King of Israel.”** Later, the title “The King of the Jews” would be used to mock Jesus (John 19:19). But here, this was a statement of who was actually in charge of Israel and who ruled and reigned over them.

Third, he called the Lord Israel’s **“Redeemer.”** God brought Israel out of Egypt, and one day, God would bring them out of their future exile as well. This was a promise of what was to come. The final Redeemer—Jesus—will come not only to redeem Israel but all the peoples of the world.

Fourth, Isaiah called God **“LORD of hosts.”** God holds all the power in heaven and on earth and commands His hosts to do His bidding at any point. The strength and authority He has is unmatched.

Fifth, God described Himself as **“the first.”** This means that everything had its beginning in God. There was no beginning for God, but all beginnings are from God. He is forever first.

Sixth, He is **“the last.”** God is eternal and the end of all things. Nothing will outlast God, and nothing can live eternally apart from Him. There is no end for those who find themselves in God because He is the end.

Seventh, **“besides me [Yahweh] there is no god.”** This is the ultimate statement God makes to declare that He is undoubtedly the only God. Beyond that, there are no other gods apart from Him.³

The question for Israel, then, was whether they would continue in idolatry, giving their honor and attention to worthless idols, or would they recognize Yahweh as the only true God? Unfortunately, they chose idols.

POINT 2

IDOLATRY LEADS TO FUTILE RELIGION (ISA. 44:7-11).

7 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. **8** Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.” **9** All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. **10** Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? **11** Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Isaiah 44:7-11** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 7-8** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The Lord has confidently laid out a challenge to any other gods to contend with Him—none can—and He calls on His people to be **witnesses** to the world of God as our **Rock**.

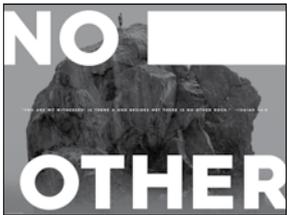
DISCUSS: Recall **PACK ITEM 5: NO OTHER GOD**, and then ask: **How has the Lord been your Rock?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 9-11** commentary to help explain the following connection between sin and idolatry (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #40: Sin as Idolatry: Sin is not only a physical act of rebellion against God, such as lying or stealing, but it is also a matter of the **heart**. The physical displays of sin are the fruit of what has been birthed in the heart of a person (Matt. 15:10-20). In Scripture, idolatry usually refers to bowing down to a statue made of wood or gold, worshiping **created** things instead of the **Creator**. But idolatry can take on more subtle forms: a seeking of approval, security, power, pleasure, etc. We can diagnose the idolatry of our heart by examining the areas where the desires of our heart have turned into idolatrous **demands** (Jas. 4:1-2).

DISCUSS: Why must we remember that every act in service to an idol is ultimately futile? (so we don't justify ourselves or others in idolatry and so give an indication that salvation can be earned by a means other than Christ; people in other religions can do good works toward others and will still pay the ultimate price for their sin; there is no power behind our idols except to draw us away from the one true God, in whom alone is salvation)

NOTES



VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“How could he fail to pity them in this also, seeing that they worship them that cannot see. In hearing, they pray to them that cannot hear. Born with life and reason, people, as they are, call gods things that do not move at all but do not even have life. Strangest of all, do they serve as their masters beings whom they themselves keep under their own power?”⁴

—Athanasius (d. 373)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 7-8 / When God poses a question, He already knows the answer, so there must still be value in the asking for our sake. Here, God asked: **“Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.”** God is all-knowing, so He can **“declare what is to come.”** He had already proven this divine ability to the Israelites through His prophets. Only a fool would have denied it. So God issued a challenge through this question, calling for evidence from the other “gods” to prove their own reality and worth. This is clearly rhetorical since God already knew they could not.

God asked that if anyone were like Him, they should come forward to make their case. Once again, He appealed to the fact that He had **“appointed”** Israel as His people. The Lord had provided for this people and foretold their path. If other gods were to rival Him, then they should be able to declare a different path and outcome, but of course, they could not.

God then reassured His people. Though God had laid down the challenge, there were no rivals who could possibly take it up and wrestle with the Lord for control or supremacy. His people whom He had formed and informed for ages were secure in His strong and gracious hand.

God also reminded the Israelites that they were His **“witnesses.”** They had seen His acts and works and knew He is the one true God. The Lord then stated that He is the **“Rock”** and that He knows no other. This wasn’t a statement leaving open the possibility of another rock but a definitive declaration that there aren’t others since this one God is all-knowing. That the Lord is the only Rock is important for the verses that follow. Rocks do not rot or decay and they cannot be heated and molded. There is only one Rock that people can hold onto and stand upon for their hope and salvation.

VERSES 9-11 / The focus of Isaiah’s prophetic word then shifts from who God is to who the idol makers were—they were

“nothing.” It is clear that God does not see idol makers as simply confused people who get a little lost along the way. Rather, these are people directly denying who the real God is.

Every part of idol making is empty and shameful. The idols that the makers create cannot do anything. Therefore, in contrast to the “witnesses” of the Lord Almighty, who have seen His great works and heard His word and law, the **“witnesses”** for the false gods cannot see and cannot know because there is nothing to see and know from their idols. Their religion and their gods are empty, so they are **“put to shame.”**

God then asked another rhetorical question: **“Who fashions a god . . . that is profitable for nothing?”** This is the most foolish thing ever. There’s no point to it at all since an idol can do nothing. So those who worship these useless idols will be **“put to shame.”** Why? Because **“the craftsmen are only human.”** The implication here is that a true God cannot be created by human hands; the Lord is eternal, with no beginning and no end, the first and the last.

Idolaters, those who make idols and those who worship them, when they stand to face judgment, they will be **“terrified”** and, for the third time, **“put to shame”** because they worshiped a man-made god. The Lord will not tolerate worship of something other than Himself, let alone something so useless as an idol. Humiliation and shame will result for those who put their hope in a man-made creation rather than in the true God of Israel.

Unlike God’s chosen people, His faithful witnesses who are commanded not to be afraid, those who follow idols should be very afraid! But thanks be to God that because of Christ, God provides a way for forgiveness and salvation for all who have followed idols. He calls us to repentance and draws us back to Him that we may find freedom and purpose in Christ alone, realizing that our idols will only lead us astray.

POINT 3

IDOLATRY RESULTS IN FOOLISHNESS (ISA. 44:12-20).

NOTES

12 The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. **13** The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. **14** He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. **15** Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. **16** Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" **17** And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!" **18** They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. **19** No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" **20** He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Isaiah 44:12-20** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 12-17** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Idols are crafted from metal, wood, or other resources God has created, but these are **nothing** more than a reflection of **humanity** and a **distraction** from the only God who saves.

DISCUSS: What are some of the empty promises of idols that only God can fulfill? (comfort; security; peace; hope; happiness; salvation; joy; purpose)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 18-20** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

We have all been **deceived** by idolatry and are rightly counted as fools. But God still calls idolaters to find salvation through **faith** in Jesus Christ.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 12-17 / In contrast to God, our uncreated, eternal, solid Rock, idols often were crafted using two different mediums.

First, **“the ironsmith”** works over the coals. Iron is a strong metal, yet a skilled worker can still mold it and shape it according to his will with heat. The man uses tools and also uses the strength of his body to form these idols. Yet the worker is human, which means he cannot keep making idols forever. He needs food and water, and if he doesn’t fuel his body, he suffers and cannot finish his work.

Second, **“the carpenter”** shapes a felled tree. The carpenter’s tools are a measuring line, a pencil, a plane, and a compass. Each of these is a man-made tool used to create and achieve accuracy in a work of human initiative. Additionally, the model for the wooden idol is another human being. Every aspect of the idol’s creation is steeped in humanity. There is nothing divine about it.

Next, we see the utter foolishness of worshiping a piece of wood on full display. The woodworker plants and cuts down a tree that he burns and ultimately destroys as fuel for a fire to warm himself and to bake bread to feed himself. The carpenter burns one half of a log and reduces it to ashes. Yet with the other half, he crafts an idol, and he worships it, praying for it to save him. Isaiah is implying that this defies common sense. How can something you burn as fuel for a fire in order to roast your supper ever save you? How can a man simultaneously use wood in service to him and bow down in service to it?

VERSES 18-20 / Everyone should be able to see how foolish it is to trust in something crafted by human hands for salvation. But we can look around and see that such knowledge is hard to come by. Jeroboam knowingly set up golden calves to compete with the true worship of Yahweh. Ahab brought in the worship of foreign idols that involved self-harm and prostitution. Every day, we human beings are guilty of

subverting our rightful relationship with our Creator by seeking joy and satisfaction in what we have created from what He has created. This is short-sighted and foolish!

Because of the hardness of their hearts, the idol worshipers Isaiah addressed continued to be unable to **“see”** or know anything. This repeats language from verse 9, but here, God is the One who shuts their eyes and shuts down their minds. By faith in God and His Word, we must hold in tension our understanding of free will and God’s sovereignty. God is in control of all things, yet we also know that we are responsible for the choices we make.

Verses 19-20 are the peak demonstration of the foolish worship of idols, and this indicts us all. **“No one”** is able to see how foolish it is to use half a block of wood for burning to heat food and the other half to make a detestable idol. Being dead in our sins, we cannot come to our senses and **“deliver”** ourselves from this self-imposed trap. **“He feeds on ashes”** paints a vivid picture of the stupidity, foolishness, and senselessness of worshiping idols and not the Lord Almighty. Not only is idolatry purposeless, it also leads to death.

This is the state of all humanity—this is us! Made to worship the One who is true and great but self-deceived to worship what is a lie and lesser, or worse, nothing at all.

The Lord is the only true God. He was not created by human hands. He has always been and always will be. To worship a hand-carved idol that cannot see or know anything instead of the God who sees and knows everything is foolish. Yet God still calls idolaters to Himself and longs for them to recognize who He is—the only true God who loves people, is compassionate toward them, and can deliver them from sin, shame, and death. The foolish chains of idolatry are broken only in Jesus. May we heed the call to trust in Christ and the warning to flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14).

POINT 1: IDOLATRY BEGINS BY REJECTING GOD (ISA. 44:1-6).

+ COMMENTARY

“The message that this royal Redeemer wants to impart is that there is no one who can even be compared to him. It is not merely that he is the greatest of the gods, but that in comparison to him, there is no other god.”⁶

POINT 2: IDOLATRY LEADS TO FUTILE RELIGION (ISA. 44:7-11).

+ ILLUSTRATION

Sometimes when working with children, you find yourself doing a majority of the work. Yet as soon as it’s all done, the child will show it to his parent and say, “Look what I made!” Your effort on the project goes completely without thanks. They forgot you were even there. The idol craftsmen in Israel were much like such children. They worked with materials God made, with muscles and strength God gave, and with skill that is reflective of God; and they worshiped the work of their hands as if there were no Creator. So often we are guilty of this. We become prideful of what we have accomplished, forgetting that God is responsible for all that we have.

POINT 3: IDOLATRY RESULTS IN FOOLISHNESS (ISA. 44:12-20).

+ COMMENTARY

“How can one part of a tree be honored as a powerful supernatural power and another part of the same tree be treated as an inanimate object that deserves no honor at all? . . . If one should accidentally choose the wrong part, one would be bowing down to something worthless and burning up a god!”⁷

References

1. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) [Logos].
2. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, vol. 15B in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2009), 220.
3. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* [Logos].
4. Athanasius, *Against the Heathen 13.4*, quoted in *Isaiah 40–66*, ed. Mark W. Elliott, vol. XI in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007) [Logos].
5. “Isaiah,” in *Africa Study Bible* (Oasis International LTD, 2016), 1035.
6. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* [Logos].
7. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, vol. 15B in *The New American Commentary* [Logos].