



# IDOLATRY

GODS THAT FAIL

2. What Do You Want?

DEUT  
32:16-21

They made him jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols. They sacrificed to false gods, which are not God— gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your ancestors did not fear. You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. The LORD saw this and rejected them because

DEUT  
32:16-21

he was angered by his sons and daughters.  
“I will hide my face from them,” he said,  
“and see what their end will be; for they are  
a perverse generation, children who are  
unfaithful. They made me jealous by what is  
no god and angered me with their  
worthless idols.”

1 SAM  
12:21

Do not turn away after useless idols.  
They can do you no good, nor can  
they rescue you, because they are  
useless.

## 2 KINGS 17:7-12

All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced. The Israelites secretly did things against the LORD their God that were not right. From watchtower to

## 2 KINGS 17:7-12

fortified city they built themselves high places in all their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the LORD had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that aroused the LORD'S anger. They worshiped idols, though the LORD had said, "You shall not do this."

ISAIAH  
2:8

Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made.

JER  
10:14

Everyone is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. The images he makes are a fraud; they have no breath in them.

HOSEA  
4:12

My people consult a wooden idol, and a diviner's rod speaks to them. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God.

ACTS  
17:16

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Is idolatry a sin of the past  
no longer relevant for the  
modern Christian?

Faith is primarily a  
matter of the *heart*,  
not the *head*.

JAMES  
K.A.  
SMITH

Jesus doesn't encounter Matthew and John—or you and me—and ask, “What do you know?” He doesn't even ask, “What do you believe?” He asks, “What do you want?” This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us precisely because we *are* what we want. Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our

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actions and behavior flow. Our wants reverberate from our heart, the epicenter of the human person. Thus Scripture counsels, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23). Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love.

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So discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing. Jesus's command to follow him is a command to align our loves and longings with his—to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all—a vision encapsulated by the shorthand “the kingdom of God.”

We may be loyal to our  
religious labels, but  
unfaithful to our God.

EXODUS  
20:3-6

“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them,

EXODUS  
20:3-6

for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

DEUT  
6:4-5

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God,  
the LORD is one. Love the LORD  
your God with all your heart and  
with all your soul and with all your  
strength.

ISAIAH  
29:13

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught."

*epithumia*

*epi*: over    *thumia*: desire

an over-the-top,  
all-consuming desire

LUKE  
22:15

And he said to them, "I have  
eagerly desired (*epithumia*)  
to eat this Passover with you  
before I suffer."

1 PETER  
2:11

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from *sinful desires (epithumia)*, which wage war against your soul.

ROMANS  
6:12

Therefore do not let sin reign in  
your mortal body so that you  
obey its *evil desires (epithumia)*.

2 TIM  
2:22

Flee the *evil desires (epithumia)* of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

We can take even good things and turn them into gods (idols) when our desire for them goes beyond what God intended, making them into ultimate desires.

COL  
3:5

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, **which is idolatry.**

EZEKIEL  
14:3

... these men have set up  
idols in their hearts

TIM  
KELLER

What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.

A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly

TIM  
KELLER

worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. ... An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has

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meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure." There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is *worship*. . . . If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol.

What do you want?





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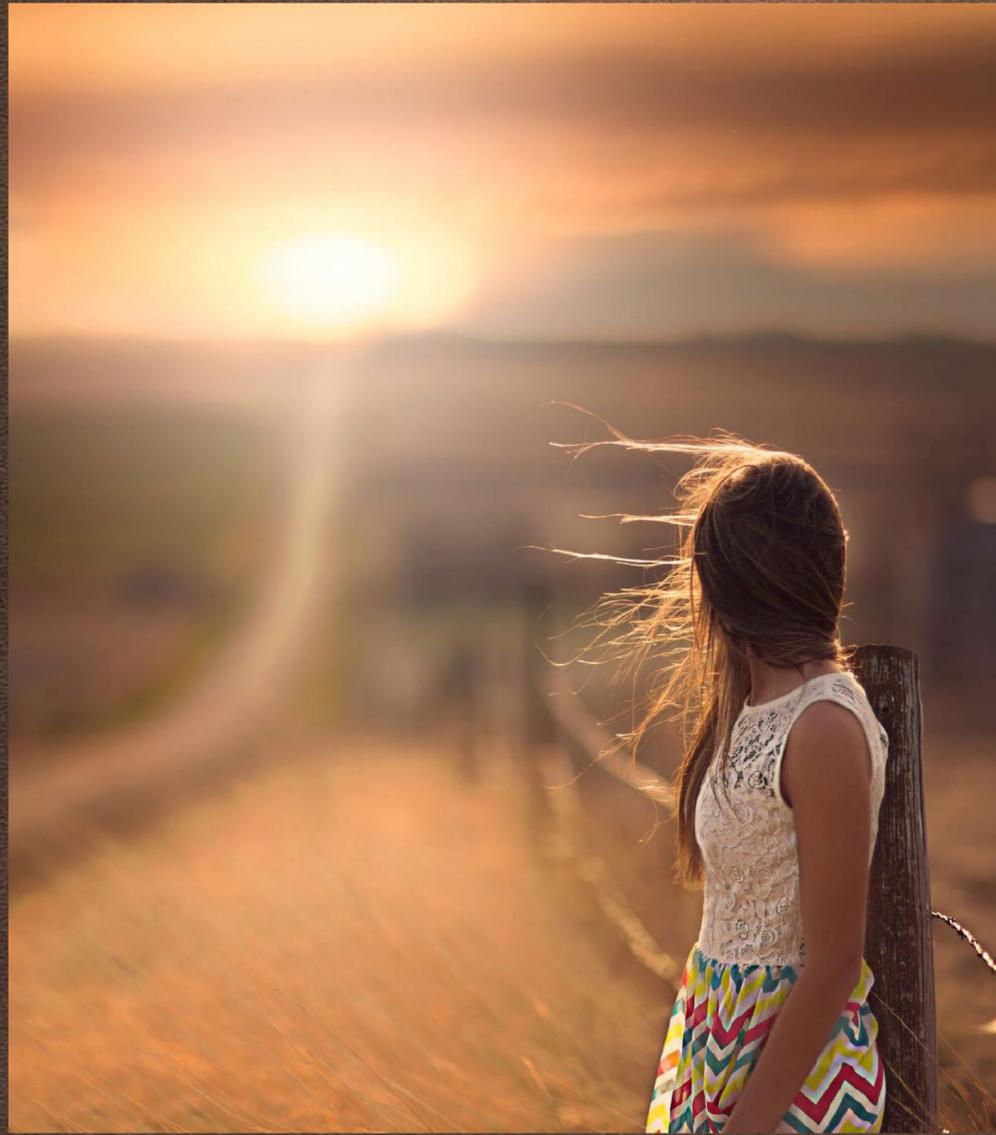
To be human is to be on a quest. To live is to be embarked on a kind of unconscious journey toward a destination of your dreams. As Blaise Pascal put it in his famous wager: "You have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed." You can't *not* bet your life on something. You can't *not* be



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headed somewhere. We live leaning forward, bent on arriving at the place we long for.

To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as "flourishing." And we want that. We crave it. We desire it. This is why our most fundamental mode of



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orientation to the world is love. We are oriented by our longings, directed by our desires. We adopt ways of life that are indexed to such visions of the good life, not usually because we “think through” our options but rather because some picture captures our imagination.



ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S

# STALKER

JEN  
POLLOCK  
MICHEL

We simply can't ignore desire. ... Desire is primal: to be human is to want. ... Reflecting on our desires asks us to address the more naked parts of who we are and why we do what we do. When we talk about desire, we undress our hearts. ... When we're stuck in patterns of chronic sin, we should think to ask, "What must I be wanting to continually persist in these

JEN  
POLLOCK  
MICHEL

choices?" We usually know that something is driving our behavior, but the forces often feel imperceptible to us. The simple question, "What do I want?" can lead to important change. ... We're asking not just *What do I want?* but *Is what I want right?* We're interested in congruence: *Is what I want what God wants for me? Am I following God's will?*





ROSARIA  
BUTTERFIELD

One very difficult aspect about sin is that my sin never feels like sin to me. My sin feels like life, plain and simple. My heart is an idol factory and my mind an excuse-making factory, especially when it comes to dealing with the kind of sin that clobbers me the most—indwelling sin—the unrelenting, ever-present kind that never takes a Sabbath

HEBREWS  
4:12-13

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

SAINT  
AUGUSTINE

You have made us for  
yourself, and our heart is  
restless until it rests in you.

JEREMIAH  
2:10-13, 25

Cross over to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD. "

JEREMIAH  
2:10-13, 25

“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. ... Do not run until your feet are bare and your throat is dry. But you said, ‘It’s no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them.’”

JOHN  
10:10-15

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.

JOHN  
10:10-15

Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

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In the 1830s, when Alexis de Tocqueville recorded his famous observations on America, he noted a "strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants . . . in the midst of abundance."

Americans believed that prosperity could quench their yearning for happiness, but such a hope was illusory, because, de Tocqueville added, "the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart." This strange melancholy manifests itself in many ways, but

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always leads to the same despair of not finding what is sought.

There is a difference between sorrow and despair. Sorrow is pain for which there are sources of consolation. Sorrow comes from losing one good thing among others, so that, if you experience a career reversal, you can find comfort in your family to get you through it. Despair, however, is inconsolable, because it comes from losing an ultimate thing. When you

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lose the ultimate source of your meaning or hope, there are no alternative sources to turn to. It breaks your spirit.

What is the cause of this "strange melancholy" that permeates our society even during boom times of frenetic activity, and which turns to outright despair when prosperity diminishes? De Tocqueville says it comes from taking some "incomplete joy of this world" and building your entire life on it. That is the definition of idolatry.

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... The only way to free ourselves from the destructive influence of counterfeit gods is to turn back to the true one. The living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the Cross, is the only Lord who, if you find him, can truly fulfill you, and, if you fail him, can truly forgive you.





# Summary

Our hearts are drawn to idols that promise us everything but take everything from us. Only God is worthy of our total trust and devotion.