

# Finding Freedom: The Wrong Gods

## 1. Overview of our series “Finding Freedom”

- 1.1. We are in the middle of a series titled “Finding Freedom.”
- 1.2. Our big idea in this series is that many of us are not fully alive. Our souls are stuck. We’re living with weights and burdens that God did not intend for us to carry.
- 1.3. But there is good news. As we read the Scriptures and explore the teachings of Jesus we discover that God has something better for us. Jesus declared:

*“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”*

*John 10:10*

- 1.4. That’s what Jesus desires for us. That’s what **we** desire for us. But sometimes we have to expose the darkness to live in the light. And so we’ve been exploring some of the practical forces at work behind the lack of freedom that many of us are living with.
- 1.5. **This morning our main idea is simple: The world is full of idols, but only one God give you life.**
- 1.6. Let’s begin by reading from Deuteronomy 30. In this passage the great prophet Moses, now at the end of his life, is speaking to the people of Israel as they renew their covenant with God.

*15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.  
16 For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.*

*17 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18 I declare*

*to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.*

*19 This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20*

## **2. Other gods**

- 2.1. This is a profound passage. Some of us may not be used to reading ancient texts like this, and the language and religious categories being used may lead us to believe that Moses' words are not particularly relevant to our own experience. But if we will slow down, and translate what is going on in this ancient setting into our own cultural context, we will find that it is deeply relevant to our own lives.
- 2.2. God has engaged the Israelites — the descendants of a man named Abraham — in order to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. After rescuing them from their Egyptian oppressors, He made a binding commitment to them — a covenant — to be their God. The Israelites would be God's treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, His holy nation.
- 2.3. In other words, God has come near to them, He has made Himself known to them, He has told them that He loves them, and He has given them a purpose. They will be a kingdom of priests. They are to mediate God's presence to the nations. They will know God and make Him known. This is the greatest thing any human being can experience. This is what we were made for. And God was giving this to the Israelites.

2.4. **So how were the Israelites to respond God? How should we respond to God when we recognize that He is present and that He is engaging us? Moses tells us in this passage: we should love God, we should trust God, and we should obey God.**

2.5. This, Moses says, is the path to life.

2.6. But Moses here also identifies one major obstacle to life. Moses says:

*17 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18 I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.*

*Deuteronomy 30:17-18*

2.7. **Devotion to other gods will lead to destruction.**

2.8. Now we obviously live in a very different cultural context than the ancient Israelites. For those of us who were raised in the western world, polytheism likely feels like a relic from the unenlightened past. We probably don't have small carved objects that we believe are actually inhabited by gods. We live in an age of science and rationalism.

2.9. **But here's where we are not so different from the ancients: We are going to love something; we are going to trust something; and we are going to obey something.**

2.10. And even ancient peoples saw that this response could extend to things that were not directly identified as gods. Let me give you an example. The prophet Habakkuk said this about the Babylonians:

*6 "I am raising up the Babylonians,  
that ruthless and impetuous people,  
who sweep across the whole earth  
to seize dwellings not their own.*

*10 They mock kings  
and scoff at rulers.  
They laugh at all fortified cities;  
by building earthen ramps they capture them.  
11 Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—  
guilty people, whose own strength is their god.”*

*16 Therefore he (i.e. the Babylonian) sacrifices to his net  
and burns incense to his dragnet,  
for by his net he lives in luxury  
and enjoys the choicest food.*

*Habakkuk 1:6, 10-11, 16*

- 2.11. Every one of us is going to make something ultimate in our lives. Each of us is going to love something, to trust something, and to obey something. Moses recognized this. And if this something isn't the one true God, we will not experience life.
- 2.12. Israel's history provides us an interesting case study of this universal human struggle with idolatry. (By "idolatry" I mean here the substitute of something lesser and created for the transcendent and uncreated God.) This morning I want to take a brief look at three moments from Israel's story in order to shed some light on our own experience with idolatry.
- 2.13. Let's begin with the prophet Hosea.

### **3. Hosea**

- 3.1. The book of Hosea begins this way.

*1 The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:*

*2 When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord."*

*Hosea 1:1-2*

3.2. Wow! That's quite the beginning to a prophetic career. How do you think that first date went?

*"So, what kind of woman are you looking for?"*

*"I would say the kind of person I can't really trust. Maybe someone prone to prostitution. A woman who is going to be unfaithful and rip my heart out."*

*"Me, me, me. Let's go out again tomorrow!"*

3.3. God's instructions to Hosea are arresting, to say the least. What is going on here?

3.4. We need a little context. As you may know, Israel, which split into a southern kingdom called Judah and a northern kingdom called Israel, was a tiny country on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Because of their strategic location, they were frequently attacked by much more powerful kingdoms like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon.

3.5. At the beginning of Hosea's prophetic career, somewhere in the neighborhood of 755 BC, Assyria was the dominant superpower. Assyria was a war machine. But for the roughly 50 or 60 years leading up to Hosea's ministry, Assyria had a series of weak leaders and had to deal with various internal struggles. So Israel and Judah enjoyed several decades of relative peace and prosperity.

3.6. And the book of Hosea tells us that, during this time, the people of Israel fell in love with other gods. It was not that they "needed" these gods for protection or that these gods were forced upon

- them. No, it was more that their hearts delighted in them.
- 3.7. The Israelites saw the cultic celebrations and the temple prostitution and the way of life of the peoples around them and decided at some point, “That’s what I want.” Maybe some of the surrounding peoples were even more prosperous than the Israelites. Maybe their parties looked better. Maybe their homes looked nicer.
- 3.8. So often a little success, or a little money, or a little attention doesn’t lead to contentment. It stirs up the desire for more. We want more success, more money, more power.
- 3.9. Whatever it is that the Israelites began to see and to taste and to touch took deep hold in their hearts. And soon they were in love with other gods and what they thought those gods could do for them.
- 3.10. God speaks of Israel through the metaphor of Hosea’s wife:

*5 ...She said, ‘I will go after my lovers,  
who give me my food and my water,  
my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink.’*  
*6 Therefore I will block her path with thornbushes;  
I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way.*  
*7 She will chase after her lovers but not catch them;  
she will look for them but not find them.*  
*Then she will say,*  
*‘I will go back to my husband as at first,  
for then I was better off than now.’*  
*8 She has not acknowledged that I was the one  
who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil,  
who lavished on her the silver and gold—  
which they used for Baal.*

*Hosea 2:5-8*

**3.11. What a powerful reality. Our hearts love other things, but God is the only one who can really provide what we want.**

3.12. There is obviously nothing wrong with loving your family, or enjoying your job, or good music, or sports, or food, or a hundred other things. The problem is when these things become life for us, when they are all we can think about. When not having them makes life not even worth living.

3.13. Are you loving other gods?

3.13.1. What do you pursue above everything else?

3.13.2. What do you dream about?

3.13.3. What fuels your imagination?

3.13.4. What do you greatly admire?

3.13.5. What do you find it easy to talk about?

3.13.6. When you imagine a happier life, where do your daydreams consistently turn?

3.14. What do you love? Will it really deliver what you hope?

#### **4. Isaiah**

4.1. Our second example comes from the prophet Isaiah.

4.2. The relative peace and prosperity that Israel and Judah enjoyed did not last. Around 745 BC a new king came to power in Assyria, and his heart was set on expansion and domination.

4.3. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed. And in 701 BC, Judah was in a desperate spot with Assyria ready to pounce.

4.4. And so the people of Judah began to form an alliance with Egypt in an attempt to protect themselves from Assyria. To us that may seem to make a lot of sense. But God had forbid such alliances because, in the ancient world, such alliances were always religious

as well as political. And so Isaiah declares:

*1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,  
who rely on horses,  
who trust in the multitude of their chariots  
and in the great strength of their horsemen,  
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,  
or seek help from the Lord.*

*3 ...the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God;  
their horses are flesh and not spirit.*

*6 Return, you Israelites, to the One you have so greatly revolted against.  
7 For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold  
your sinful hands have made.*

*Isaiah 31:1, 3, 6-7*

- 4.5. **When the pressure is on, what do you trust?** Judah was no longer living in days of relative comfort and prosperity. They were trying to survive. Assyria was threatening to wipe them off the map.
- 4.6. Moments like that expose where our trust lies.
- 4.7. Our idols provide us with a sense of security, confidence and control. We think they will save us, or protect us, or provide for us.
- 4.7.1. What do you feel that you must absolutely have in life?
  - 4.7.2. What, if you lost it, would make life virtually unlivable?
  - 4.7.3. What gives you a sense of confidence and security?
  - 4.7.4. What makes you uncontrollably angry, or anxious, or overwhelmed with despair?
- 4.8. What are you trusting in?

## 5. Daniel

- 5.1. Our third example comes from the prophet Daniel.
- 5.2. By Daniel's day, the Babylonians had gained the upper hand in the near east, and, with the help of the Medes and Persians, they had conquered Assyria.
- 5.3. In 605 BC the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem and Judah, and Daniel, as a young man, was taken into exile in Babylon.
- 5.4. Daniel was now in a very different place than the people Hosea had addressed and the people Isaiah had addressed. He was an exile living in a culture permeated by the worship of pagan gods and he was expected to conform.
- 5.5. Indeed, everything around him would have suggested that worshiping the gods of Babylon was the most rational thing to do. The Babylonians had decimated Jerusalem, which clearly demonstrated the superiority of their gods, right?
- 5.6. The city of Babylon itself was impressive and imposing; far more spectacular than Jerusalem, from which Daniel had come.
- 5.7. And the food Daniel was offered from the king's table in Babylon would have strongly suggested that the path to prosperity and success was with Babylon's gods.
- 5.8. Repeatedly, Daniel and the other young men from Jerusalem who were with him were pressed to conform and obey.
  - 5.8.1. Eat the king's food and drink — food and drink which had probably been sacrificed to idols.
  - 5.8.2. Go by new names, names associated with pagan gods.
  - 5.8.3. Learn the arts of the Babylonian magicians and enchanters.
  - 5.8.4. Worship the image of gold created by the king.

5.8.5. Pray to no one except the king for the next 30 days.

5.9. **When we are in contexts in which the successful people around us are all serving the same idols, we will feel pressure to conform and obey.**

5.10. We think: “That’s just what successful people do, or happy people do, or well-connected people do, or the people with influence do.”

5.11. This is why the example of Daniel and his friends is so remarkable. Everything was pressing them to conform and to worship the gods of the Babylonians. When Daniel’s friends were threatened with being burned alive for not bowing to an image of gold, here was their response.

*16 ...“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

*Daniel 3:16-18*

5.12. Our idols demand that we obey and conform.

5.12.1. Whom are you trying to please?

5.12.2. What are you giving your time and energy and money to?

5.12.3. Whose unwritten rules are you following?

5.12.4. Whose values are you embracing?

5.12.5. Whom do you fear disappointing?

5.13. Whom are you obeying?

5.14. Moses told the Israelites:

*19 ... Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to*

*him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

*Deuteronomy 30:19-20*

5.15. Only one God will bring you freedom. Everything else is an idol that will ultimately bring destruction to your life.

## **6. So how do we live out a commitment to the living God?**

6.1. Many of us are not intending to devote ourselves to an idol or substitute god. In fact, some of you here this morning may not even be religious people, and you may be thinking to yourself, “I don’t intend to worship anything. I just want to be true to myself, follow reason, and live a good life.”

6.2. Let me challenge you with a thought. Remaining “god-less” is impossible. You are going to make something ultimate. It is impossible for the human heart to go without a god.

6.3. You’re going to go somewhere to experience a sense of awe and wonder. You’re going to commit yourself to some source of truth. You’re going to go somewhere for meaning and purpose.

6.4. You may deify human autonomy, or science, or sex, or power, or a hundred other things, but you will embrace a god.

6.5. Some of you intend to worship the one true God, but, like the rest of us, you find your heart prone to embrace a substitute god. How do we abandon false idols and faithfully love, trust, and obey the true God?

### **6.6. Firstly, we need to choose to fix our eyes on God.**

6.6.1. There are some ways in which our hearts are not nearly as mysterious as we think.

- 6.6.2. If you keep your favorite snack on your desk right next to your computer, how long do you think it will be before you eat it? 10 minutes? 20 minutes?
- 6.6.3. Marketers know this. That's why they spend significant money to get their product before your eyes.
- 6.6.4. Ancient people recognized this. That's one of the reasons they fashioned idols. They wanted something physical to focus on in their worship. (But God also knew this would cause problems. He knew such attention on a physical object would lead to gross misunderstanding of who He was and what He was like.)
- 6.6.5. You can strengthen your desire for something just by regularly putting your attention on it.
- 6.6.6. This is why we see the command to put our attention on God all throughout the Scriptures. The apostle Paul writes:

*1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*

*Colossians 3:1-3*

- 6.6.7. Attending Sunday services is important. You need to come together with a body of people and put your attention on God in worship and let His Word fill your heart. You need to regularly taste and see that the Lord is good.
- 6.6.8. You need to turn your attention to God in worship and prayer every day.

**6.7. Secondly, we need to engage the Scriptures more deeply.**

- 6.8. Knowledge and faith are not opposed to one another. They're connected.
- 6.9. If you have only a superficial knowledge of the Scriptures, your trust in God will wither over time. It's very difficult for your heart to hold on to something that your mind doesn't really believe.
- 6.10. Understanding deepens faith.

**6.11. Finally, we need to walk in community.**

- 6.12. Even the great prophet Elijah began to despair when he thought no one else around him was living for God.
- 6.13. If you try to live for God by yourself in the midst of a culture that worships money, power, image, sex, and the self, you will find it very difficult. You weren't meant to live this way. Freedom is not something we can maintain by ourselves. Isolated people are vulnerable people. But community brings strength.

## **7. Communion**

- 7.1. We're going to fix our attention on God this morning by celebrating the Lord's Supper.

*14 When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. 15 And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. 16 For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."*

*17 After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. 18 For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."*

*19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

*20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you..."*

*Luke 22:14-20*