

I-Dulls of Heart and Stone

God's Word to the Mountains against Idolatry

Ezekiel 6:1 The word of the Lord came to me: ²“Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them, ³and say, You mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord God! Thus says the Lord God to the mountains and the hills, to the ravines and the valleys: Behold, I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places. ⁴Your **altars** shall become desolate, and your **incense altars** shall be broken, and I will cast down your slain before your **idols**. ⁵And I will lay the dead bodies of the people of Israel before their **idols**, and I will scatter your bones around your **altars**. ⁶Wherever you dwell, the cities shall be waste and the **high places** ruined, so that your **altars** will be waste and ruined, your **idols** broken and destroyed, your **incense altars** cut down, and your works wiped out. ⁷And the slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

⁸“Yet I will leave some of you alive. When you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries, ⁹then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols. And they will be loathsome in their own sight for the evils that they have committed, for all their **abominations**. ¹⁰And they shall know that I am the Lord. I have not said in vain that I would do this evil to them.”

¹¹Thus says the Lord God: “Clap your hands and stamp your foot and say, Alas, because of all the evil **abominations** of the house of Israel, for they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. ¹²He who is far off shall die of pestilence, and he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who is left and is preserved shall die of famine. Thus I will spend my fury upon them. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain lie among their **idols** around their **altars**, on every **high hill**, on all the **mountaintops**, under every **green tree**, and under every **leafy oak**, **wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols**. ¹⁴And I will

stretch out my hand against them and make the land desolate and waste, in all their dwelling places, from the wilderness to Riblah. Then they will know that I am the Lord.”

(Ezekiel 6:1-14)

Idolatry

What is idolatry? This fascinating question gets at the heart of our story in Ezekiel 6. It is important to look at it. *The Heidelberg Catechism* Q. 95 famously asks, “What is idolatry?” Its answer, “It is instead of the one true God who has revealed Himself in His word, or along with the same, to conceive or have something else on which to place our trust.”¹ Martin Luther in his Larger Catechism said something similar. “Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God; trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol.”² More recently, Timothy Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* gives this definition, “[An idol] 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.”³

¹ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Heidelberg Catechism*.

² Martin Luther, *The Larger Catechism*.

³ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xvii. Cited in Mark R. Stevenson, “Holiness and the Problem of Idolatry,” *Emmaus Journal* 19 (2010): 183.

I think many Christians these days are comfortable with these definitions. But they are definitions that I would refer to as “abstract idolatry.” The NT certainly speaks this way when it says things such as “Greed is idolatry” (Col 3:5) or “the greedy person is an idolator” (Eph 5:5). Jesus seems to imply the same thing when he talks about serving God or Mammon (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:14). And the Apostle seems to link the same thing to our bellies or appetites (Rom 16:18; Php 3:19). Yet, this isn’t even the first or even most fundamental idea behind idolatry.

Luther’s comment comes as he is discussing the First Commandment. Of course, that isn’t really all that helpful, since as a Lutheran, he sees what Protestants identify as two separate commandments as one big commandment, just as Rome did. A. A. Hodge on the other hand, asks the question, “What is idolatry?” as he explores the Reformed and Jewish breakdown of the commandments, asking the question under the First Commandment.⁴ And yet, Brian Rosner, in his academic article on idolatry says, “On numerous occasions the nation failed to keep the second commandment,” thus saying idolatry belongs to the second, not the first commandment.⁵

⁴ Archibald Alexander Hodge, J. Aspinwall Hodge, *The System of Theology Contained in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: Opened and Explained*. (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1888), 177–178.

⁵ Brian S. Rosner, “The Concept of Idolatry,” *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (1999): 23.

Ten Commandments Bridge: Idolatry's Place

We know the question is obviously important, but **where exactly does idolatry fit in the Ten Commandments?** There's confusion here. As I said, Martin Luther, following the Roman Catholic tradition, saw the First Commandment—"You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make a carved image"—as one big rule against idolatry, focusing on what your heart trusts, whether it's God or something else like money or power. But **John Calvin** and the Jewish tradition split these into two commandments: the First about worshiping only God, and the Second about not making idols to worship. My own study, inspired by scholar Moshe Kline, suggests the Second Commandment is the heart of a beautifully structured unit—a chiasm—that starts with God's identity, centers on forbidding carved images, and ends with His jealous love (**Exodus 20:2–6**). This literary pattern shows that idolatry is first and foremost about **making physical images**, not just abstract desires like coveting, which comes later in the Tenth Commandment.

- A. **I am the LORD your God**, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
- B. You shall have **no other gods before me**.
- C. You shall make you no carved likeness and no image**
- I. of what is in the **heavens** above
 - II. or what is on the **earth** below
 - III. or what is in the **waters beneath** the earth.⁶
- B'. You shall **not bow down to them or serve them**,
- A'. 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.

This matters because it directs us to what I will call concrete or **literal idolatry**. This is the form of idolatry that the Bible so fiercely condemns, and yet which few Protestants want to even talk about, unless perhaps they are talking about Roman Catholic statues of saints. **The Second Commandment** zeros in on **crafting images to worship other gods**, like the golden calf or Solomon's high places. I've never seen anyone craft an idol to look like their stomach! But listen to the following verse, for we will return to it. "**Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for**

⁶ This translation follows **Robert Alter**, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, 2019).

Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem” (1Kgs 11:7).

The Ten Commandments’ move from God’s transcendence (First-Second Commandments) to our human hearts (Coveting), but at its core, idolatry starts with **physical objects** made to represent supernatural beings that pull us away from the true God. This literal idolatry is what God’s people were constantly warned against, and it sets the stage for understanding why God is so passionate about it. Let’s dig deeper into what these idols really were in the ancient world to see why they provoked His jealousy.

Literal Idolatry: The “Flesh of the Gods”

In the ancient world, idols weren’t just “**sticks in the mud**” or lifeless statues, as we modern folks might think. They were believed to be the “**flesh of the gods**,” physical bodies housing divine or demonic spirits. Augustine noted this centuries ago (*City of God*, 8.23.1). In Egypt, priests crafted cult statues from gold, wood, or stone—materials like those in **Ezekiel 6:4–6**—because their shining brilliance was thought to capture the gods’ otherworldly power. Gold was their “flesh,” literally. Through secret rituals, these statues were “consecrated,” inviting a god or demon to dwell within,

much like a Hindu temple trustee recently said, “**These deities are not statues anymore. They are live gods.**”⁷ The ancients saw these idols as real conduits to supernatural beings, not mere symbols, which is why they offered sacrifices and prayers to manipulate their favor.

John Frame explains this as a “**sacramental union,**” where the idol wasn’t just a picture but carried the sanctity of the god itself, demanding worship or veneration.⁸ In the Bible, these idols are linked to real spiritual beings, demons or rival *elohim* like Chemosh or Molech. This wasn’t a superstition of “**ape-like**” people; it was a worldview where physical objects connected heaven and earth, housing an invisible entity. **Israel was forbidden** to make such images because they invited demonic powers into God’s sacred space, betraying His covenant like an unfaithful spouse (**Ezekiel 6:9**). This literal idolatry was no small matter—it was spiritual adultery with real consequences.

But here’s where it gets even more sobering: the ancient Hebrews weren’t just warned about golden statues. They were told to “**utterly detest and abhor**” these gods (**Deut 7:25–26**), because worshiping them meant **uniting your heart**

⁷ **Andy Newman**, “[Breathing Life Into Gods, and Into a Hindu Temple](#),” New York Times (May 26, 2008).

⁸ **John Frame**, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 454.

with a demon, not just a carving. The prophets mocked these idols as “worthless” (Psalm 96:5) or “dung,” but they never denied their spiritual reality. In fact, Paul says pagans sacrifice to demons (1Cor 10:20). This is why God’s jealousy burned so fiercely—Israel wasn’t just chasing abstract desires but aligning with rival spiritual powers, right in His holy city. This brings us to Ezekiel 6, where God confronts the “mountains of Israel” and their high places, declaring judgment on this very kind of idolatry.

Ezekiel 6: Context and Structure

Ezekiel 6 further develops the first large narrative of Ezekiel 1-11. Having been called in the divine council setting of Chs. 1-3, the prophet was then told to carry out a series of “sign-acts.” These acts would embody the coming disaster upon Jerusalem and the terrors of war through a prophet who would act them out each day, while saying nothing. But in Ch. 6, Ezekiel is given his first command to finally prophecy—to say something.

Chs. 6-7 give us two distinct messages. The first is God’s judgment against the idolatry of Judah. The second will be a discourse on the very soon coming Day of Judgment. While

they are related like two sides of the same coin, they are distinct enough to each warrant their own sermon. So today we will look only at Ch. 6.

The chapter itself is a simple A.B.A' structure with the only good news coming in the center.

A. Judgment on idolatrous places (6:3–7): Destruction of altars and high places.

B. Remnant spared, recognizing God (6:8–10): Central focus on mercy and divine recognition.

A'. Judgment reiterated, desolation (6:11–14): Reaffirmation of destruction and exile.

Prophecy to the Mountains (Ezek 6:1-2)

The chapter begins with those important words, “**The word of the Lord came to me**” (**Ezek 6:1**). We’ve seen this before. It means that **a physical manifestation** of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word of God, is coming to Ezekiel.

He then gives Ezekiel **his divine duty** for this chapter: “**Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them...**” (**2**). This is very strange. Prophecy against **mountains**? The only other prophet who is told to do this is Micah, when he prophesied to the northern

kingdom. “Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before *the mountains*, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, *you mountains*, the indictment of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel” (**Micah 6:1-2**). What we discover is that in both cases, both prophets are going to target *idolatry* (**Mic 1:5-7; Ezek 6:3-6**). But why should these words be directed at the mountains?

We get a hint of the answer in **vs. 6** where God will lay waste to Judah’s “*high places*.” But it is **vs. 13** that really makes it clear. “*And you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols.*” You see here that Israel has erected idols and altars on every high hill and on all the mountaintops. Therefore, *the mountains are witnesses* to their crimes against God. They’ve seen exactly what Israel is doing. They know and they can bear witness. Thus, Isaiah is to speak to them, even as Micah once did.

But why mountains? You can only begin to understand the answer to this once we move from that abstract sense of

idolatry “of the heart” to the more concrete idolatry of actual statues and idols and altars. For these things were created to worship fallen, supernatural *elohim*—the gods of the nations. Before getting to that, it will help if you recall your [Greek mythology](#), since this is the story most can still remember.

Recall that the Greeks had a pantheon of gods who lived *on top of Mt. Olympus*. Twelve deities. Traditionally, they are: [Zeus](#)—king of the gods and [Hera](#), his Queen; [Poseidon](#), god of the sea and [Demeter](#); [Apollo](#) and [Athena](#); [Ares](#) and [Artemis](#); [Hephaestus](#) and [Aphrodite](#), [Hermes](#) and [Hestia](#) (or sometimes Dionysus). Olympus was their home, but also the place where they deliberated in the Greek divine council. [Homer](#) said they lived in the heavenly realm above the physical mountain (*Iliad* 1.493-611). Each dwelt [in their own palace](#), built by Hephaestus, on the mountain of “[many peaks](#)” (606-08), with Zeus’ described as grandest and the seat of authority.

It was from Mt. Olympus, then, that the gods deliberated over human affairs. This makes Olympus what scholars call a “[cosmic mountain](#).” Richard Clifford explains, “[In cultures which have a heaven, earth, and hell, the mountain ‘center’ is the axis along which these three cosmic areas are](#)

connected and where communion between them becomes possible.”⁹ In other words, it is a link between heaven and earth. We find this, of course, throughout the Bible: Eden is a cosmic mountain as we will see in Ezekiel 28. So is Ararat, Sinai, Zion, and Calvary. Basically, any mountain where God chooses to make his abode and meet with man is a cosmic mountain.

It is the cosmic mountain idea which explains why Israel would go around on all the various mountains raising altars and idols. In doing this, they were creating places where they could commune with God or, worse, with the gods. Let's continue reading by going to the first thing Ezekiel was told to say. “Say, You mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord God! Thus says the Lord God to the mountains and the hills, to the ravines and the valleys: Behold, I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places” (Ezek 6:3). The key idea here is to now verbalize the razor-hair-sword “sign-act” from the previous chapter. God is coming to destroy with the sword. But what will he destroy? “Your high places.”

We need to take another step away and go back into Israel's deep history to understand this better. Yes, high places

⁹ Richard Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, Harvard Semitic Autograph 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 6.

links directly to mountains, as we have seen. However, there is something more we need to know. In the entry for “High Places” in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, we learn rather surprisingly that,

Prior to the monarchy, *bāmôt* [high places] were considered legitimate worship spaces and received no condemnation, neither for their existence nor for their use. *Bāmôt* met the religious needs of the fluid environment of the tribal confederacy along with the “temple” or “house” of Yahweh at Shiloh, a semipermanent structure perhaps built around the ancient tabernacle (1 Sam 1:7, 24; 3:15; 1:9; 3:3). Even though a plurality of *bāmôt* existed, there is no hint in the narrative that the people were sacrificing indiscriminately.¹⁰

This is rather stunning, to say the least. I dare say most of us think that the problem was high places themselves. But apparently, that was not the case **until the days of the monarchy**, particularly, the building of the temple. You see, until the temple was built, God had no “house.” But once it was built, this became the place of his residence on, of course, Mt. Zion—the now permanent cosmic mountain of

¹⁰ D. L. Petter, “High Places,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 413.

the OT. When Solomon built the temple he said, “The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have indeed built a house for you, a place for you to dwell in forever” (1Kg 8:13). As Solomon finished his prayer we learn, “Fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and *the glory of the LORD filled the house*... For I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time” (2Chr 7:1-2, 16). This was in accordance with the prophecy in Deuteronomy 12:5, “But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make it [or him¹¹] dwell there. There you shall go.”

Because God had not established a permanent place to dwell until the temple, high places as such were not condemned, so long as one was worshiping Yahweh on them. Of course, worshiping the gods has always been condemned, wherever it happens, as the First and Second Commandments teach.

Now, let's return to Solomon for a moment. Recall that “Solomon built a high place for *Chemosh* the abomination of

¹¹ While the grammar strictly speaking should take an “it,” if “name” is personified as it is in something like Isa 30:27, when it is a theologically justifiable translation to say “him.” The Targums seem to do this by substituting the Shekinah for “it,” a kind of personified glory-theophany.

Moab, and for *Molech* the abomination of the ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem” (1Kg 11:7). Later on “And the king defiled the high places that were east of Jerusalem, to the south of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had built for *Ashtoreth* the abomination of the Sidonians, and for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites” (1Kg 23:13). This verse adds *Ashtoreth* (and changes Molech to Milcom) to the list of gods, but in this case, it is king Josiah who is defiling their altars by destroying them, meaning that Solomon had defiled these sites by building them in the first place, as the text even tells he did this so that his many foreign wives who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods (1Kg 11:8).

It has long puzzled me that Solomon could dedicate the temple and say, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no god like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart” (1Kg 8:23). Early on, Solomon continued to sacrifice and made offerings at the high places (1Kg 3:3), even though he loved the Lord! Because the monarchy was centralizing power in Jerusalem, this was no longer going to be acceptable. So it was a grey area. But

later we see the LORD becomes angry at Solomon because his heart had turned from the LORD and he went after other gods (11:9-10).

The whole shift from God being the only Creator to the worship to the gods is a subtly of deception of the seriousness of entertaining the gods *in* Israel. Not necessarily worship them, simply housing them. On one hand you can think of Solomon this way. He has just made for Yahweh this great palace, akin to something like Zeus had on Olympus. No one denied that Zeus was the *top dog or god*, depending on if you are dyslexic. Solomon knew that God made all things (Ecc 12:1; cf. 1Kgs 8:27; 2Chr 2:5-6).

On the other hand, he knew about the existence of the other *elohim*. And he very likely believed that they were not rivals to the LORD. It is important here to note the language of the text. Ashtoreth is the *abomination* of the *Sidonians*. Chemosh is the *abomination* of *Moab*. Milcom/Molech is the *abomination* of the *Ammonites*. Molech is not the abomination of the Sidonians, Ashtoreth is. Ashtoreth is not the abomination of Moab, Chemosh is. Why? Because these are the gods that were allotted to these nations at Babel, apparently. Those gods belong to those nations.

The other nations' gods may have put up with rival worship. Not Yahweh. Yahweh takes Israel to be his treasured possession (**Deut 4:20; 32:9**; etc.). Israel must not worship the gods of the nations around them, because Yahweh has covenanted with Israel. And he is the Creator of all things. To bring their worship into Israel is to test the their own marriage fidelity. It would be like inviting a pretty girl to live in the room next to you and your wife. Indeed, isn't this exactly what Solomon did?

In my estimation, it is reasonable to think that Solomon justified what he did along pragmatic and political lines. "I'm not erecting any altars to these gods *on Zion*. That's Yahweh's mountain. I wouldn't dare blaspheme God. But hey, they are part of the divine council, so why not "venerate" them," as a good Roman Catholic might say about Mary and their saints that they put into statues on every high hill where they build their churches. "Plus, those gods are the gods of my wives. I wouldn't want them to have to lose their cultural identity just because I made a political alliance with their fathers!" And just like that, Solomon **instituted state veneration** of the gods, on "high places" which weren't condemned anyway. And all this quickly turned into all out **idol worship**, because that is the nature of the human heart.

Let's finally get back to Ezekiel. “Your altars shall become desolate, and your incense altars shall be broken, and I will cast down your slain before your idols” (4). There are three words we need to look at here. First, we have the *mizbeah*, the “altar.” This was a structure for offering sacrifices and in Ezekiel, they were at the high places (*bamot*). Yahweh had altars, but so also did the gods. A second word is *hammanim*—incense altar. It may derive from the deity Baalhamon, worshiping in Carthage, from the verb *chamam* “to be hot.” It may derive from *chama*, meaning “to protect.” They appear not to be little incense altars, but some kind of a chapel above the larger altar complex that somehow protected them.¹² Finally, you have the *gillulim*—idols. Importantly, this is not the same word used in the Second Commandment. That word is *pesel*—a graven or carved image. This word means something more like a “detestable thing” or “dung-idol” (with a nod back to Ezek cooking his food over human dung). This is Ezekiel the priest’s favorite word, using it 39 of its 48 appearances in the OT, often with the verb “defile.” These are objects that ritually defile a place

¹² Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 225. See the discussion in Michael S. Heiser, “Ezekiel 6,” The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0 Number 115 (Aug 28, 2016).

because they are inherently unclean, and Ezekiel may deliberately be associating idols with dung, because that's a colorful if not crude way of getting the point across of how detestable they are to God when you are in covenant with him.

In the verse then, God is going to **make the altars become desolate**, that is no one will remain to practice their pagan worship there. The chapels of protection will be **broken**. And the slain will be **cast down** before the idols, a rather horrific way of depicting the truth of idol worship—like dead people bowing before dung-idols. Vs. 5 simply repeats this. “**And I will lay the dead bodies of the people of Israel before their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars**” (**Ezek 6:5**). Instead of living people breaking covenant in pagan altars, there will only be a collection of bones to perform the rituals and bow at the feet of the statues.

Again, **vs. 6** intensifies the point. “**Wherever you dwell, the cities shall be waste and the high places ruined, so that your altars will be waste and ruined, your idols broken and destroyed, your incense altars cut down, and your works wiped out.**” All of this comes straight out of the Torah. **Lev 26:30** in **the covenant curses** says, “**And I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars and cast your**

dead bodies upon the dead bodies¹³ of your idols, and my soul will abhor you.”

All of this wraps up in **vs. 7**, “And the slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” The point of the coming disaster is to make God’s people realize that **he told them all this centuries ago**, very explicitly in the covenant curses. All Ezekiel is doing here, really, is just going back to Leviticus and Deuteronomy and saying that the time has now come for these curses—promised by the Lord back in the days of Moses, to come to pass. That’s how they will know. God already told them, even as he is telling them now that these things will happen, and soon.

I want to skip ahead to **vv. 11-14**. This will allow us to see the other slice of bread that encompasses the central meat of the chiasm of the chapter. And, like any good sandwich, it’s basically bread cut from the same loaf as the other piece.

Thus says the Lord God: “Clap your hands and stamp your foot and say, Alas, because of all the evil *abominations* of the house of Israel, for they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” (11). **Deuteronomy 27:15** says,

¹³ Heiser notes that casting “your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols” sounds very odd. “Dead bodies” is the word *pegarim*. It can mean both a corpse or a stela—a kind of man-cut headstone where religious inscriptions or even the spirits of dead ancestors were caused to reside. So an alternate translation is, “... cast your dead bodies upon or at the stela of your idols.”

“Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an *abomination* to the LORD...” And, of course, we’ve seen how Solomon erected the “*abominations*” of the gods on the high places east of the temple. The abominations are the idols that house the gods.

The sword, famine, and pestilence is all predicted in the covenant curses. **Leviticus 26:25–26**: “I will bring a *sword* upon you, that shall execute vengeance for the covenant... And when I have broken the staff of *your bread*, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven... you shall *eat* and not be satisfied.” This predicts sword (war) and famine for covenant violation, including idolatry (**26:30**). **Deuteronomy 28:21–22, 49–51**: “The LORD will make the *pestilence* stick to you... The LORD will strike you with... fever... The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away... it shall besiege you... you shall *eat* the fruit of your livestock... and you shall be only oppressed.” These verses list pestilence, sword (foreign invasion), and famine as curses for disobedience, including idolatry (**28:36**, “serve other gods”).

Vs. 12 intensifies it. “He who is far off shall die of pestilence, and he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who is left and is preserved shall die of famine. Thus I will spend

my fury upon them.” Vs. 13 reiterates what we saw at the end of vs. 7, “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols.”

And vs. 14 finishes it off, “And I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land desolate and waste, in all their dwelling places, from the wilderness to Riblah. Then they will know that I am the Lord.” Again, we find this in both Leviticus (26:31-33) and Deuteronomy (28:37, 64-65), where God promises to make lay waste to the cities and sanctuaries and make them desolate and a waste. The wilderness to Riblah refers to the Negev, which extends to the farthest southern border of Judah and beyond to Riblah (modern Rablah), north of Mt. Hermon, to the north of the farthest extent of Israel’s northern border. This becomes a merism, a rhetorical device indicating the entire land of Judah/Israel, from its southernmost to northernmost boundaries. Totality! Israel and Judah are toast.

Heiser’s primary teaching point in his podcast on this is that Judah’s idolatry, especially state-sponsored worship at

high places near the temple, was the trigger for exile, fulfilling Leviticus 26's curses. These cultic installations represent **intentional covenant violation**, as leaders knowingly worshiped other *elohim*, defiling Yahweh's sacred space in Jerusalem on purpose. Unlike private idolatry, this institutional apostasy provoked God's severe judgment.

The Remnant

All of this is, of course, **terribly depressing and devastating**. But in our story today, we thankfully have **good news**, and this good news sits right in the middle of our two slices of bread which sandwich the beginning and end in God's judgment. But there in the middle, like the delicious creamy filling of an Oreo Cookie, we have **three amazing verses** of God's mercy towards something called elsewhere called **the remnant**.

“Yet I will leave some of you alive. When you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries, then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols. And they will be loathsome

in their own sight for the evils that they have committed, for all their abominations. And they shall know that I am the Lord. I have not said in vain that I would do this evil to them” (Ezek 6:8-10). Now, upon an initial hearing, you might not think this is all that wonderful. But the only way you could think this is by not truly appreciating what human depravity and sinfulness against God, especially those in covenant with him, truly deserves, nor the actual beauty that is a thing we call repentance. Let’s deal both with repentance and the remnant before we bring this home to our own situation today.

Appearing over eighty times in the Bible, the remnant refers to what is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe.¹⁴ The OT and NT use several words (*š’r*, *ytr*, *plṭ*, and *śrd*; the major Gk terms, *leimma*, *hypoleimma*, *loipos*, and *kataloipos*) and the theology appears in many of the prophets, including Ezekiel. It’s first appearance in our book will be a question from the prophet to the Lord, “Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?” (Ezek 9:5). But though this definition sounds mostly negative because of the indivisible association with

¹⁴ Lester V. Meyer, “Remnant,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 669.

catastrophe, in many instances, the word becomes quite **positive**. For remnant, like a seed of a tree that has been cut down, will survive and become the basis of renewed hope and life.

This is where **repentance** comes in. Repentance is according to the meaning of the word, **a turning**. The Hebrew word *shuv* literally means “**to turn**” or “to return.” It is both physical and metaphysical. “**Turn! Turn from your evil ways,**” **Ezekiel 33:11** will say. The Greek word *metanoeō* is similar. From *meta* (**change**) and *noeō* (**mind** or understanding) is literally a changing of one’s mind, a transformation in thinking that leads to a change in behavior and direction. Even our English word repent comes from the Latin *repae-nitere* (re- meaning “**again**” and *paenitere* meaning “**to regret**” or “be sorry.” Thus, repenting is sorrow and regret for sin and a turning of direction and a change of mind from evil to good, from Satan to God.

This turning is itself **a gift of God**. In Jeremiah, Ephraim pleads, “**Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God**” (**Jer 31:18-19**). In Lamentations the prayer is, “**Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return**” (**Lam 5:21**). In Joel, God calls his people to “**return to me with all your heart**” because I am “**gracious and compassionate**” (**Joel**

2:12-13). In the NT as well, Peter explains how the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and the people conclude, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). Paul tells Timothy to gently correct opponents hoping that “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2Tim 2:25). And Peter with the apostles declare that Jesus was exalted “to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

The remnant also presupposes that God has deliberately saved a handful of evil people, and thus it becomes associated with divine election and salvation. In Romans, Paul says, “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved’” (Rom 9:27). A couple chapters later, this remnant of Israel transforms in the church, “So too at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (11:5).¹⁵

All of this is encapsulated in the *center* of our passage. God will leave some alive. It will not be an accident or coincidence or because, oops, the Babylonians couldn’t quite get the job done. This is an act of divine sovereign grace.

Those who escape and live among the nations of the world to tell about what happened will become broken over

¹⁵ Return to this in the next sermon, interacting with Heiser’s discussion of evil and “free will.”

their whoring. This is because they will have heard the word of God, that God swore and brought it to pass. He told them what and why and then it happened. They are without excuse.

They will see that **God himself has been broken because of it**. It is the image of a Lover long putting up with his adulteress wife, but having no other recourse than to finally send her away because all she does is mock him. He is heartbroken and devastated because his whoring spouse just didn't care in the end. Actually, sending away **is the language of "divorce,"** as this was the exact thing Abraham did with Hagar. Yet, this is also the identical language of going away into captivity. This is why God calls this in other places a **divorce** (**Isa 50:1; Jer 3:8**).

But remarkably, it is precisely here as they behold God broken because of their sin that the remnant **will internalize what has happened**. They will be loathsome in their own sight for the evils they have committed. They will be **humbled**. They will confess their sin. They will repent. And this, my dear friends, is the grace of repentance. For though it feels a terrible burden to admit what you've done, at the end of the day, repentance is a turning back to God.

Idolatry Today

This brings me to my ultimate point about how Israel's captivity still affects us today. The subtlety of Solomon's treachery was [justifying his worship of other gods while claiming loyalty to the Lord](#). Breaking the Second Commandment always leads to breaking the First. How much more for people who, like sheep, know nothing but going astray? [State-sponsored idolatry](#) was Solomon's sin. Yes, individuals were guilty, but Israel's leaders bore greater responsibility for leading the people into the proper worship of the One True God—true because He alone is faithful to His covenant. For their sin, the people were punished, as leaders represented them before God.

Someone says, “[That's not fair](#).” It is fair because all the people had turned to their own ways. But besides that, [representational covenants](#) are the way of the world, even in America, where our Founders set up a government with elected “representatives.” This is why, when they get out of hand, Jefferson argued it's the people's duty to overthrow that government and start anew. But my point is this: if you reject representation *in judgment*, you can't have it *in salvation*. The good news is we have [a covenant representative, the Lord Jesus](#), who perfectly obeyed God's covenant and

offers eternal life, though we've done the opposite. His "unfair" representation becomes your life if you trust God's promise.

For application today? Some argue nations should legally condemn idolatry and permit only worship of the One True God. This is tempting, as seen in the Reformation and even in America's founding, where state religion echoed Christianity. But I think we need to think about two things here. First, **believe it or not, God never condemns Gentiles for worshiping false gods**. Yes, he *mocks* them relentlessly in the prophets, because fallen angels are powerless compared to the Lord and bear some blame in this, since God gave the nations to them. What He universally condemns is *His covenant people* worshiping other gods, committing spiritual adultery. Here, Solomon's sin resurfaces in the New Testament. **Idolatry is more than just statues or demons, though it is never less than that**. Idolatry is greed, covetousness, anything your heart trusts more than God, anything absorbing your imagination more than Him, seeking what only God can give. Curiously, even these tie to fallen beings—Mammon, Plutus, Dionysius, Aphrodite, Eros. Still, **we can't blame anyone but ourselves**.

It is easy to justify sin by saying you haven't made an idol. At the same time, it's also plenty easy, as we have seen, of even making a literal idol and saying you aren't *worshiping* another entity, even though that's the definition of what you are doing—be it a high place to Baal or a statue to some saint or Mary. It's identical.

This means that *the church*, not the state, which is *the institution today that is in covenant with this God* of Ezekiel, must once more proclaim the evils of idolatry, including the worship of other gods, the incorporation of their forms of worship into our own worship, and even the more abstract ideas of idolatry that we have discussed. As you can see, the Lord takes this sin very seriously.

Solomon thought he could honor Yahweh while tolerating other gods, believing they were lesser in Yahweh's divine council. But this led to outright idolatry, dragging Israel into spiritual adultery. Today, we face the same danger, not just in abstract idolatry—greed, power, or self—but in a shocking *return to literal pagan worship*. The gods are returning with a vengeance. The NT warns us: “*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry*” (1Cor 10:14), urging escape from demonic worship, like Israel's high places. Colossians 3:5 commands, “*Put to death therefore what is earthly in*

you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry,” linking heart sins to the same betrayal.

In America, and even in our churches, we’re sprinting back to pagan gods—literal statues, rituals, and spiritualities that echo Ashtoreth or Molech, alongside abstract idols like wealth and status that consume our hearts. The church, God’s covenant people today, **must reject both**, proclaiming Jesus as our mediator who perfectly obeyed, offering life through His grace (**Rom 11:5**). We owe him our fidelity as his Bride. Like Ezekiel’s remnant, we are called to repent, turning from every high place—whether a statue or a heart’s desire—to trust only the God who jealously loves us. Will we heed His call, or will we, like Solomon, justify our idols until judgment wakes us up?

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