

He is God and We are His

20 “Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save. 21 Declare what is to be, present it— let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.

22 “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. 23 By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. 24 They will say of me, ‘In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength.’” All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame. 25 But all the descendants of Israel will find deliverance in the LORD and will make their boast in him.

I don't know if there is any writer of the Scriptures who is so good at taunting those who worship idols and pointing out the uselessness of idolatry as Isaiah. Sometimes he mocks men for having to nail down their little gods to the table so that they won't fall over. Here he says that their little wooden gods need to be carried around-- the very gods who should have carried them. And he asks the idolators who it is who really can foretell the future, their firewood or the God who has set all of history in motion in order to bring you and me to faith?

The prophet calls the Gentiles with these wooden burdens “fugitives from the nations.” They are seen as those who have been judged by God, and their judgment has been carried out, and these are stragglers. Their judgment isn't yet Judgment Day, but the judgment that often comes in a human lifetime, when the Word of God is proclaimed, the gospel is offered, but it is rejected by those who just can't believe it. Sometimes God offers unbelievers another chance to turn to him by allowing terrible tragedy to enter their lives: war, weather, famine, or disease. This is where we would look for the stragglers, the fugitives the prophet taunts. They shuffle along with their remaining few possessions, cradling their little wooden gods in their arms.

Isaiah makes this taunt to show the people their sins, to show them their folly, but all the while God is there, ready to leap to their rescue, his whole plan for saving them and the rest of mankind fixed firmly and perfectly in his heart and mind.

So this passage parallels our Gospel account. While the prophet calls out to the people to repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near, Mark shows us that Jesus was there already in the wilderness, facing the temptations we face, the sinless Son of God standing in for mankind. Our rescue had already begun.

This is why it's so important for us to know the true God. Salvation only comes through him. And who he is, is no mystery. You see Isaiah compares the proof of God's place through two separate actions in God. The first is creation. The idols have made nothing at all. In fact, no

matter what an idol is, it is taken from God's creation. Only the true God exists outside creation as the Creator. And Isaiah proves his point by talking about prophecy itself, that is the kind of prophecy that foresees the future. Only the true God has foreseen anything at all, and only he has a perfect record: Everything God has promised will take place, has taken place. Oh, a false prophet can babble out a scattering of predictions and be right about a couple of them. Who couldn't utter a thousand predictions and be right about at least ten or even two hundred? But God can utter a thousand prophecies and be right about all of them. And in the same way only the true God produces anything for his people, even the heathen so that they might come to faith in him. And God's salvation is the true salvation of forgiveness and the resurrection of the dead, proved over and over again in the Bible by people being raised from the dead by prophets, apostles, and the Lord Jesus himself.

Isaiah describes unbelievers as "those who have raged against him," against God. We dishonor God in so many different ways, raging against him, but the First Commandment, **to have "no other gods,"** must be at the very heart of our obedience to God and of our repentance over sin. In the prophets, God often compares idolatry with the sin of adultery, unfaithfulness to God. Variations of this include (1) denying that there is a god at all, which is atheism, (2) worshiping idols like the ones in our text, little man-made figurines in superstition, (3) worshiping an idol of the mind, like the Greek, Roman and Norse gods, fickle and vengeful beings that had all the worst characteristics of sinful humans and were almost better examples of how not to live than how to live better, (4) worship an idol of the attitude, like the search for nothingness and the meditation over nothing one finds in eastern mysticism, and (5) doubt, including the doubt of the agnostic who wants to say that he doesn't know if there's a god, but also including Christians who say they believe, but doubt whether God could really ever forgive their sins. They fail to trust in the gospel.

All of our sins break the First Commandment as well. A woman who can't control her potty mouth thinks that her habits are to be obeyed more than God's holy will. A man who can't resist the desire to have what everyone else has, even if he conceals his aching desire by not actually falling into stealing, is still guilty of coveting, which puts the human will above God's holy commandment, and rots the spirit so much that it will eventually afflict his body with pains and ulcers and other ailments. Every sin has this in common: When we sin, we have neither feared nor loved God enough to shun these temptations, to avoid these sins, and to win any personal victory over sin. As one of my teachers once said, **"It is not too much to say that any teaching or preaching of the law without the First Commandment at its heart and core is little more than moralizing. It will not bring us to see how great our sin is."**^a

So what does it mean to **fear God above all things**? It's not to just be scared for God and his wrath. No, it's the kind of fear you have when you walk up to a horse or open the hood of a car to jump start the battery. It's realizing the power of what it is you have approached. The power of the horse is such that you know, if you befriend this animal, she will obey you. She is capable of hurting you, but also of carrying you, working for you, and even dying for you or with you at your command. The power of the car is such that if you make a wrong move jump starting a dead battery, you can accidentally burn out the electrical system and depending on the value of the machine, turn the whole vehicle into junk, or even get hurt by an electric shock in the attempt.

^a Prof. Daniel Deutchlander, *Grace Abounds* (NPH 2015) p. 398.

But if successful, the vehicle can carry you across the country and all over the continent. Some cars, well-maintained, have traveled 250,000 miles—the distance from the earth to the moon.

The power of God fills us with awe and respect. Being aware of our relationship with God, of putting him first in all things, of giving him glory and obeying his word, puts God first in our hearts. We love him because he first loved us, and his love and power mean that we will go farther than to the end of our lives, or all the way to the moon in our night sky. God's power and love mean a journey of more than time or space, but through all eternity. God's power means the resurrection from the dead, the judgment of Christ's righteousness instead of my sinfulness, and a place with God forever and ever in heaven.

Again and again in our text and other places in the book, God said, *Ki Ani El, We Eyn 'Od*, "*for I am God and there is no other.*" This is at the same time a proclamation of the law but also of the gospel, because God invites and invites and invites: "Turn to me and be saved!" Even the stragglers and fugitives of nations judged and smashed by God and his armies can still recognize their sin, hear about their Savior, and put their trust in him and love him.

To love God is to be grateful and thankful for what he has done without wishing that we had accomplished our salvation by ourselves. That would be a jealousy that would get in the way of trust, and we need to rely completely on God to take us from this sinful, fallen life, into the sinless resurrection and joy of eternity.

So God gives us a guide for keeping his First Commandment. A simple trio of Do's and Don'ts. We could say we should "**Love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength**" (Mt. 22:37), and we can **cast all our cares on him**. Luther teaches us simply in the catechism "**to fear, love and trust in him above all things.**" So that we don't worship false gods, or deny the true triune God, or trust in wealth, possessions or other things or people more than God.

When he says through the prophet, "Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear," he means every single knee in heaven and hell for all eternity. Those who are saved will praise him in joy. Those who are condemned will give him the honor he deserves in terror and shame.

But we who have understood the depth of our sins and who know that Jesus has taken away our guilt, we will be able to say together: "**In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength.**"

What a blessing it will be to praise God for saving us! In him we have rescue and peace. His hand caught us before our fall into the depths of sin took us all the way into the pit of hell, and he has set us safely, not on a shelf or a ledge from which we might fall once again, but in his lap, at his side, around his table, in his own house, in heaven, forever with Jesus. For that we praise him with our actions, with our music, with our words, with our prayers, and with our innermost thoughts. He is God, the only true God, Jesus Christ our Lord. There is no other. And we are his. Amen.