

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Idolatry**

River beds usually witness a lot of sedimentary activity. Water flowing from the inlands usually picks up a lot of debris and they slow down as the channels feed into a larger water body, giving the particles they have picked up time to settle down. A negative side effect of this is that the depth of the river bed gradually reduces. Eventually, if left unabated, larger ocean liners will not be able to find their way up these watercourses. Whenever man faces this challenge, an activity called dredging is carried out. Dredging involves the excavation of a portion of the sea or water bed. It could involve the use of simple or complex dredging equipment to remove the accumulated debris. The result is usually an enlarged and deepened river bed.

Our lives are equally prone to a similar process. We pick up certain habits, attitudes, and practices as we journey through life. Some of these things we pick up are to our own detriment. The challenge with the human case is that the effect is not as readily measurable as with river beds. The depth of a water body can be easily measured. However, with us, we never notice the signs that we are filling up and

becoming shallow. This usually persists until something comes along that reveals how shallow we have become, and scrapes off some dirt at the bottom of our oceans. Whenever this happens, we enjoy the benefits for some time before the debris begin to pile up again. Many people go through life repeating this cycle. However, if we are going to be the best we can be in life, we have to dredge our lives periodically. This has to be deliberately done at regular intervals.

Idolatry is a significant issue that subtly but rapidly fills up our river beds. Perhaps at the beginning of this chapter, when you saw the title, your mind flashed to human beings bowing down to some physical object or idol. This is almost always the first image that flashes across the mind when we see or hear the word idolatry, before our imagination kicks in to either water down the image or make it more elaborate. Idolatry has always been a challenge throughout human history. If you would care to check the records of the rising and falling of civilizations, you will notice a close interplay between the effect of a society's placement of God over idols, and vice versa, on the rise and fall of the civilizations. Most civilizations, including the one we are enjoying, were heralded in by a close partnership of the human race with God. As with most of the other fallen civilizations, we often get to a point where we forget how we came to the level we occupy and begin to neglect the importance of God in our

affairs. Ultimately, we turn to other things and credit our success to them. Whenever a civilization gets to this point, its fall is imminent. Perhaps the best documented example of this interplay is the biblical history of the nation of Israel. Whenever Israel sought after God it prospered, and whenever it abandoned Him, it suffered, often ending up in captivity.

We should take a cue from this by recognizing that if we are to maximize life, the presence or absence of idolatry in our lives will be a major factor. In this chapter, we will look at idolatry in detail. One of the major prophets in the Old Testament saw a vision that dealt with idolatry and the people of God. It is documented in Ezekiel Chapter 8, and the account of that vision is given below.

### **Idolatry in the Temple**

*Then on September 17, during the sixth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity, while the leaders of Judah were in my home, the Sovereign Lord took hold of me.*

*I saw a figure that appeared to be a man. From the waist up he looked like a burning flame. From the waist down he looked like gleaming amber. He put out what seemed to be a hand and took me by the hair. Then the Spirit lifted me up into the sky and transported me in a vision of God to Jerusalem. I*

*was taken to the north of the gate of the inner courtyard of the Temple, where there is a large idol that has made the Lord very angry. Suddenly the glory of the God of Israel was there, just as I had seen it before in the valley.*

*Then the Lord said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." So I looked, and there to the north, beside the entrance to the gate of the altar, stood the idol that made the Lord so angry.*

*"Son of man," he said, "Do you see what they are doing? Do you see the great sin the people of Israel are doing to drive me from my temple? But come, and you will see even greater sins than there!" Then he brought me to the door of the Temple courtyard, where I could see an opening in the wall. He said to me, "Now, son of man, dig into the wall." So I dug into the wall and uncovered a door to a hidden room.*

*"Go in," he said, "and see the unspeakable wickedness going on in there!" So I went in and saw the walls engraved with all kinds of snakes, lizards and hideous creatures. I also saw the various idols worshipped by the people of Israel. Seventy leaders of Israel were standing there and with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan in the middle. Each of them held an incense burner, so there was a thick cloud of incense above their heads.*

*The Lord said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the leaders of Israel are doing with their idols in dark rooms? They are saying, 'The Lord doesn't see us; he has deserted our land!'*

*Then he added, "Come, and I will show you greater sins than these!"*

*He brought me to the north gate of the Lord's Temple and some women were sitting there, weeping for the god Tammuz. "Have you seen this?" he asked. "But I will show you even greater sins than these!"*

*Then he brought me into the inner courtyard of the Lord's temple. At the entrance between the foyer and the bronze altar, about twenty-five men were standing with their backs to the Lord's temple. They were facing eastward, worshipping the sun!*

*"Have you seen this, son of man?" he asked. Is it nothing to the people of Judah that they commit these terrible sins, leading the whole nation into violence, thumbing their noses at me, and rousing my fury against them? Therefore, I will deal with them in fury. I will neither pity nor spare them. And though they scream for mercy, I will not listen" (Ezekiel 8:1-17).*

The rest of the story is concluded in the subsequent chapters of the book of Ezekiel. I find it remarkable that when God delivered Israel out of captivity in Egypt, the first commandment He gave them was related to the entire vision narrated above. The Israelites had been enslaved in the land of Egypt for about four hundred years. There they were subjected as slaves to their Egyptian masters. But the time for

the maximization of their destinies came when God wanted to fulfill His promise to them and to establish them as a nation. He sent an excellent leader, Moses, whom He used to deliver the Israelites out of the hand of the Egyptians. God knew that freedom could not guarantee that His people would become what He intended for them to become. So, He set out some basic guidelines which they would live by, and the very first of these principles which came to be known as the Ten Commandments was:

*I am the Lord your God who rescued you from slavery in Egypt. Do not worship any other gods besides me. Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish. You must never worship any of them, for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god! (Exodus 20:1-5).*

One would expect God to turn the Israelites from their slavery mentality. We would have expected the first admonition to them would be that they get educated and get familiar with the principles of success. Rather, He gives them this rather obscure instruction. If this instruction was relevant for the Israelites thousands of years ago, with its effect documented in many historical accounts, it is wisdom for us to adhere to the same instructions. This single

instruction provides the right context, or frame of reference, for every other thing to deliver. Not everyone guilty of idolatry will admit to it. Most who practice idolatry do not even know that they have engaged in it. I believe one reason why this vision came to Ezekiel was that God desired to warn and turn His people back to the right paths. Let us, therefore, look at some lessons we can draw from this encounter as we attempt to dredge our lives.

### **What is Idolatry?**

The first commandment, which was mentioned earlier, contains within it God's description of idolatry. I believe this should be the central definition we should adopt as it comes directly from the all-wise God. He states: *"I am the Lord your God who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods* (Exodus 20:1-5).

Some salient points stand out here. Firstly, God says that we are to worship Him and Him alone. Hence, *no other Gods besides me*. It is rather ironic that the very examples He gave

for the Israelites to guard against, were the very same ones they were worshiping in the vision. Secondly, there is another point He makes which should put every one of us on our toes. He says He will not share our affection with any other god.

Idolatry transcends physically bowing down to other gods. Subsequently, we shall see the different forms these gods take on. We are in danger of idolatry when we bestow a certain level of affection and emotional attachment to anything that is not of God. Bluntly putting it, idolatry is not putting God foremost in your life. Idolatry is having any other thing holding the central position in your life, whether you are conscious of it or not. This is why idolatry is a very subtle vice. When we use this yardstick, many of us fall short. And this is the same reason many of us are not experiencing the heights God intends for us to attain. But rather than cower and give up, we can do something about it.

### **Who Should be Concerned about Idolatry?**

Everyone. Everyone still alive. That is the obvious truth. Ezekiel's vision came when he was in the midst of the leaders of Judah. In this vision, he saw the leaders of the house of Israel as offenders; and all the revelations were within the temple setting. These indicators are all related to God's



people. Therefore, even though this message of warning about idolatry is directed to everyone, those of us who call God our Father need to be extra careful. That the vision was set in the temple implied two things. First of all, it implies that this is a message of warning to the entire church body. Secondly, our body is the temple of God, and this implies that this is a warning to us as individuals (2 Corinthians 6:16). Therefore, this is a message to Christians as a corporate body and as individuals. It is not a message directed strictly at the leaders. Every child of God is a potential leader; so do not succumb to the temptation of pointing fingers at your leaders. This message is directed to you.

### **The Image of an Idol**

In the account of this vision, a certain large idol that made God very angry is mentioned. What exactly is this idol and what does it represent? Some Bible translations render this as the image of jealousy. Others render it as the image of the idol of the goddess Asherah. Irrespective of what this idol represents, it is definitely against God's will. Its presence in the temple of God is more worrying.

When we consider this idol to be an image of jealousy, it takes on a certain light. Jealousy in itself may be described as

strongly wanting someone else's position, advantage, or possessions. Jealousy is a strong feeling and, if you recall, God says He will not share our affection with any other god. Now the question is, *what do you feel so strongly about that you do not have and which has become a predominant force in your life?* Whatever this is could very well be your image of jealousy. This idol, in particular, was visibly displayed in the temple. This implies that it is not a hidden idol. It is a common one. *If the things that you are jealous for are not of God and Him alone, then the idol of jealousy that provokes God to jealousy may be in your life.* We are made primarily for the worship and service of God. Therefore, God should hold the first place in our lives. When we pay excessive attention to other things to the point that they become so dominant, we begin to provoke God to jealousy. The objective here is not to reduce the value we place on our needs, desires, and relationships. Rather, we need to position our value of God properly such that He holds the principal place in our endeavors.

Also, when we consider this idol to be an image of the idol Asherah, it takes on a different slant. The goddess Asherah is linked to the goddess of love and fertility, the female counterpart of Baal. Wherever their worship prevailed, sexual immorality proliferated. Severally, when such idols were popular in the history of Israel, male prostitution

became common. When Moses delayed from coming down from the mountain during his encounter with God at Sinai and the people convinced Aaron to make them the golden image, the Bible records that the following morning, after the people offered sacrifices to the idols, they indulged in pagan revelry (Exodus 32:6). The depiction of this idol within the temple shows the sexual immorality in the church. St. Paul repeatedly stresses the dangers of sexual sin throughout his epistles. For this idol to be openly portrayed showed how widespread this vice is. No other sin affects the human body so much. It behooves us to check ourselves in this regard. Not only to maximize our lives here on the earth but also to remain standing at the end of time.

Sexual sin and jealousy will gradually fill up the ocean of your life until only the tiniest canoes can navigate their way through. Deal decisively with these vices if they exist in your life and help others to deal with them too. No matter the pleasure or gratification you get from them, indulging in these activities is to your own detriment. By engaging in sexual immorality, you rob yourself of a world of great possibilities. You disqualify yourself from being enlisted into the school of kingdom greatness. You cheat yourself. If it persists, the river of your life will eventually dry out and leave you with a desert experience in life. If you refrain from illegitimate sexual indulgence in all its forms, you begin to

dredge the river of your life, paving the way for a world of exploits.

### **Hidden Idols**

As the vision proceeds, God moves the prophet past the publicly displayed idols to the more subtle ones. Many of us pay so much attention to the more obvious forms of idolatry that we become ignorant of its other forms. Where idolatry becomes dangerous is when it takes on its more subtle forms. In these forms, it is more difficult to identify. These were the forms Ezekiel was presented with.

There is a category of idols that I call hidden idols. These are the idols whose presence are not obvious. In the encounter of the vision, Ezekiel was asked to dig into the wall and when he did, he discovered a door. He went in through the door into a hidden room where he was presented with more idols. The truth is that hidden idols are present. They are not always obvious, but whenever we become conscious of the possibility of them existing, we raise our chances of discovering them. Nothing is as precarious as having hidden idols in our lives. This is aggravated by an ignorance of what idol worship is. Like I have mentioned earlier, idol worship transcends bowing down to a physical idol. It transcends having something take the place of God in our lives. Idolatry

is failing to put God first and failing to make Him the center of our lives.

### **Disguised Idols**

When the prophet went in through the door, he saw what I call disguised idols. The ability of idols to remain hidden, coupled with their ability to show up in disguised forms, is at the heart of understanding the menace of idols. Evil may disguise itself as good and harmless. Even after digging, we still may not recognize them for what they are. Ezekiel says that when he went in through that door, displayed on the wall roundabout were engravings of all kinds of snakes, lizards, and hideous creatures. When we read *...all kinds of snakes, lizards, and hideous creatures...* we may recoil and think “ugh, that’s despicable”. But if the Bible were to be written in today’s context, the choice of words could pretty well have been: *every form of music, movies, friendship, gossip, hobbies, habits, objectives, aims, talk, actions, practices, beliefs, and so on.*

The issue is not how despicable or how presentable whatever is in consideration is. What draws the line between an object or an issue becoming an idol is that thing becoming the predominant thing in your life. This is why many idols remain hidden. The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible’s

rendition of this vision records that these despicable objects were displayed on the walls round about. These things are everywhere. And many people are worshippers of these idols. The prophet says that the leaders of Israel were standing in the midst of the objects and burning incense. If even the leaders could be practitioners of this form of idolatry, it is wisdom for everyone to dig deep and search for these hidden idols that may be in our lives. Something we need to note again is that these things in themselves may not be evil. What turns them into idols is where we have placed them.

### **Ubiquitous Idols**

There is another characteristic we need to understand about idols. When the prophet was in that hidden room, he mentioned that these disguised idols were visibly portrayed on the walls. If they were everywhere in those days, one thing we can be certain of is that they will still be very much round about us today. The challenge arises when we get so used to these things that we are no longer conscious of the danger they pose. We get so comfortable with them being around us that we subconsciously begin to imbibe some practices that are dedicated to these idols. With time and sufficient

exposure, our conscience loses its ability to react against these things.

Take music, for instance. The lyrics of some songs that top the charts today would have caused your ears to tingle a couple of years ago. But with time, even if you have not come to like such music, you have learned to tolerate it. Besides, you really may not have a choice since a large percentage of the readily available songs contain such lyrics. The same goes for certain movies and reality shows. This is the whole idea behind the ubiquitous idols. The idea is to get us used to having them around. Once that objective has been met, the next step will be to get us to begin to engage in their worship.

You could also get so committed to a noble cause that before you know it, the cause itself has become your god. This is another dimension of this subtlety. The cause an individual is committed to is probably not as important as the reason he is committed to that cause. Idolatry extends beyond the activities we partake in and into why we take these actions. And because these practices may be so widespread, we may find ourselves doing things we do not know are related to idolatry. The objective of this is not to make you excessively cautious about the things you do and the reasons behind your actions. However, we need to understand the means through which idolatry enters our lives. The prophet's account goes back on to tell us that when he was brought back into the

open, he saw some women weeping for Tammuz. Tammuz was a god. It is reported that some worship rituals for this particular god included weeping and putting the branch to the nose (KJV renders it this way instead of “thumbing their noses at me”). Both practices were witnessed by Ezekiel in this vision. I would like you for a few moments to put yourself within this setting. Assuming you were a devout worshipper who was frequently at the temple, and you regularly witnessed these rituals going on, do you not think that it’s possible that over time, you will become used to these practices? Won’t you also agree that it would only be a matter of time before you joined them? Whatever we observe frequently, we tend to imbibe.

Consider for a moment the implication of having *ubiquitous idols* round about us. There are many things we do, we believe, we have come to accept and even practice, that originate from idols; objects that have taken the central place in our lives or in the lives of others. Even the subjects of success and greatness have become idols for many. Most people who are driven by the idol of success will never attain true success. So many things we do are adoptions of unhealthy practices. For some, it may be a mindset, a desire, an approach to life, or a lifestyle among others.

Recognize what idols are.

Recognize that they may be hidden.



Recognize that even when they are visible, they may be disguised.

Recognize that they are everywhere and recognize that it is possible to fall into idol worship without knowing it.

### **The Subtle Idol Take Over**

Behind every idol and every practice of idolatry is the desire of the enemy to destroy your destiny. Whether you like it or not, you have an adversary. This adversary is the enemy. He desires to rob you of the best in this life and hereafter. His principal objective is to get you off God's best for you, and he does this by trying to take God out of your life. That is his primary objective. He tries to get you to shortchange yourself by deceiving you into enthroning something else as the lord of your life. Every idol around you has the principal objective of becoming your master. That is why God sternly warned against going after any idol. Jesus revealed that a slave cannot be greater than his master (Matthew 10:24), and you are a servant of whoever or whatever you obey. Let me reiterate that idols have a mandate to take over your life, and when you openly reject them, they resort to their subtle, but highly effective tactics. This, I believe, was the case with the twenty men in the inner courtyard of the temple. The prophet recounts that:

*...At the entrance to the sanctuary, between the entry room and the bronze altar, there were about twenty-five men with their backs to the sanctuary of the LORD. They were facing east, bowing low to the ground, worshipping the sun! (Ezekiel 8:16),*

There is something rather unusual with this scenario. When people want to watch a football match, they go to a stadium where the match would be played. When people want to go for a drink with others, they often go to a bar or some convenient location where alcohol would be readily available. The sole reason people go to church is to worship God and fellowship with others. Generally, when people want to do something, they go to places where such things occur by default. If you want to get medical attention, you would go to a hospital instead of a manufacturing company. It would, therefore, be highly unusual for someone to want to go to worship an idol in the temple of the Lord. Rather, he would go to the temple of his idol. There was something abnormal with the men coming to worship the sun in the temple of God.

This set of men had been subtly taken over. They very likely would have come to the temple to worship God, but for some reason, they ended up having their backs to the temple, facing the sun in the east, and worshipping the same (vs 16).

When we consider this, we can readily draw out some points. The first and more obvious one was that they had desecrated the temple of God by worshipping a strange god there. The second and less obvious implication depicts the manner in which idols subtly take over.

The Bible, especially the Old Testament section, was written to an agrarian society. During such times, the sun meant everything. It provided light and heat. It was responsible for rainfall, irrigation, and crop performance. Every work was related to the rising and setting of the sun. In this context, the sun was their source of livelihood. When we consider this perspective, the men bowing to the sun transcends “Sun worship”. I believe that these men would have gone to the temple of the sun god if they wanted to worship the sun. These men must have come to the temple to serve the Lord, but they ended up having their backs turned to God, and their attention turned to the sun in the east. If we were to render an interpretation in more contemporary terms, it would go this way.

*Faced with so many challenges, these men originally came to God to look for help. Unfortunately, they so magnified their personal needs, desires and challenges that they ended up turning their attention away from God and towards whatever had become their rising sun in the east; their source of income, livelihood, sustenance and survival. To these men, this “sun”*

*may have been a job, a business, a skill, or something that gave them a material foothold in the world. These are the things we believe make for greatness and success. They are important, but not important enough to come close to our value for God.*

Many of us come to God to fellowship with Him, but over time, we end up magnifying our needs to great dimensions. And at the end of it all, we have our backs turned to God and our faces turned to our needs or our means of meeting these needs, which are often the idols we have in our lives. This is the subtle idol take-over, and you have got to be careful not to fall victim. Too many of us have raised up idols in our lives, allowing the issues and cares of this world to become gods unto us. We need to guard against this carefully and ensure that our “God worship” never unknowingly turns to idol worship. Challenges will come, but we should never magnify these challenges in our hearts. We should not set them up in ways that allow them to begin to contend with our comprehension of God.

### **The Effect of Idolatry**

The concluding verse of this chapter presents some things to think about.

*Therefore, I will deal with them in fury. I will neither pity nor spare them. And though they scream for mercy, I will not listen (Ezekiel 8:18).*

This is not a beautiful picture. But it is the unavoidable end to a life committed to the practice of idolatry. In the course of this vision, God mentions that the practice of idolatry will send Him away from the temple. This is the first major effect of idolatry. It drives God away from us. Friend, no matter what you achieve in this life, if God isn't in it, you will never be fulfilled. I implore you not to spend your entire life trying to find out if it is true or not. It is. If you want to maximize life, you need God in your life, and for Him to remain, you need to kick those idols out. Now you know a lot more about idols, you are certain to be more aware of them, and this is the first step to living free of idols and walking into the fullness of life with God as your center. No matter what you do, what your plea is, or how loud you cry, idols in your life prevent God from helping you. The effect of idolatry extends beyond your maximizing this life. It could also affect you in the life hereafter. Get rid of the idols.