
Idols
of the Heart

Idols of the Heart

*Learning to Long
for God Alone*



Elyse Fitzpatrick



P U B L I S H I N G

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*To Phil for his steadfast love and patience:
It's because you laid down your life day after day
that I was able to do this.*

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Introduction

Observing the World's Gods

During the spring of 1998 my husband and I and our cousins had the privilege of touring the Orient, spending about twelve days in China, South Korea, and Japan. Because we were with tour groups, we visited a number of Buddhist temples. We saw the oldest Buddha, the largest Buddha, the most venerated Buddha. We saw a Buddha that had been stolen during a battle and a Buddha that had been damaged by fire and rebuilt. We were asked to donate to a fund set up so that a certain Buddha could be refurbished in gold. We saw the Buddha that belonged to the emperor and the Buddha that belonged to the common people. We watched as worshipers lit candles and burned incense, offered prayers and set bowls of food and flowers before their gods. By the time the tour was over, my husband and I had seen enough idols to last us a lifetime. Or had we?

We were glad to return to America, a country with a Christian foundation. Unlike the Asian countries we visited, America doesn't have idols on every corner and days set aside to burn incense or light lanterns to our gods. We don't have large temples where we offer bowls of rice . . . or in our parlance, French fries. In fact, 76 percent of Americans polled "consider themselves

completely true to the First Commandment,”¹ “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). So, when it comes to the first commandment, we’re doing a pretty good job, right?

I imagine that if you’re like me, you tend to think about idols in the terms that I’ve just described. Idols are something outside of us; they’re something foreign, something you take pictures of in far-off temples, something you wonder at.

The Gods in Our Heart

For me one of the most chilling commands in all of Scripture is in Matthew 22. Let me remind you how a scribe came to Jesus, seeking to find an avenue to accuse Him of heresy. “What is the most important of the commandments?” he asked. Jesus replied,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment. (Matt. 22:37–38)

Perhaps you’re like me, and you’ve read that command so many times it’s lost its impact. Go back now and reread it and think deeply with me for a moment. What is our Lord commanding here? Nothing less than our undivided love and worship. Just as soon as I pause to reflect on that principal command, I begin to get uncomfortable. I have to ask myself,

- Do I love Him with everything that I am, or are there other loves in my heart that clamor for my attention?
- Do I worship additional gods, or is He always, and in every case, the supreme Ruler who receives my undivided passion and devotion?

When I think this way I begin to see that perhaps idolatry is something more than Buddhist temples, incense, and rice. Idolatry has to do with love—my love for Him, my love for others, my love of the world. When I look at idolatry in these ways, I understand that I'm not so different from those people I observed in temples so far away.

A Life Free from Idols

This book is written for those of you who desire to live a godly life and yet find yourself in a recurrently disappointing struggle against habitual sin. This book is written for you who find yourself constantly tripping over the same bad habit, the same embarrassing weakness, the same sinful slavery that you hoped to be free of years ago. In this book you'll learn that idolatry lies at the heart of every besetting sin that we struggle with.

When you stop and think of it, the Bible is filled with stories about individuals and even nations falling into idolatry. In fact, it's the most commonly discussed sin in all of Scripture. First Corinthians 10:11 says that the Old Testament stories are an example for us, that "they were written for our instruction."

One of the first stories about idolatry is that of Rachel, Jacob's wife. Because Rachel's problem with idolatry is so prominent in her narrative, we'll be looking into her life frequently in this book—discovering how her failures might instruct us. We'll also see how the stories of others in Scripture, both men and women, enlighten and inform us about our false gods today. You will notice that the beginning of some of the following chapters have vignettes written in italics. These stories are not directly from Scripture, but are my interpretation of what might have happened. They are not to be taken as strictly biblical, and are only illustrative.

Since the Bible is God's Word to His children, children whom He knows thoroughly, there must be a reason why He's inserted so much teaching on this subject . . . even though it may seem to us that idolatry isn't that big of a concern. (Remember that 76 percent of all Americans polled thought they were guiltless in this area!) As you read further, you'll discover that idolatry is just as big of a problem for us today as it was for the Israelites of old. In fact, perhaps it's even bigger—because we've conveniently categorized idolatry as something that exists outside of us (little stone statues) rather than something that lives within our hearts.

In the chapters to come you'll learn the ways in which the focus of your love and the focus of your worship are similar. Whom do you love? And whom do you worship? are crucial questions that are linked together. You'll learn to identify the false gods that live in your heart: in your thoughts and your affections. And then you'll learn about God's method of freeing you from your idols by His sanctifying power.

I want you to know that my struggle with sin and idolatry is the same as yours—the same as Rachel's. Like her, we all struggle with putting our hope and trust in something, someone, anything other than the true God. We find ourselves weak, afraid, fretting or angry, bitter and complaining. In the midst of this struggle, I believe that God's voice is calling us: clearly, lovingly bringing illumination and liberation.

Although our war with sin will continue until heaven, God has covenanted Himself to our growth in holiness. He wants us to join in this battle with Him, and He's given us weapons to use in this struggle. One of the weapons He's given us is knowledge. Not knowledge that consists in mere lifeless facts, but rather a dynamic awareness of the realities of our personal struggle with sinful idolatry and God's faithfulness to accomplish our deliverance.

Microwaveable Holiness

I love the convenience of the microwave, don't you? Just pop the casserole in and, presto, instant dinner. Life is better in our house since the invention of the microwave. I can defrost dinner ten minutes before I need to make it . . . and with my scatteredness, that's a real blessing! I enjoy all of our modern conveniences, don't you? But, in the middle of this instant, *Give it to me quickly! It better be convenient!* culture, we tend to think that God should work in our lives in the same way. *Just zap me and make me holy—and quickly, Lord, if You don't mind.*

God's work in us is sometimes slow moving. Although it's true that all Christians know some change (even if it's minuscule), God's work, our sanctification, is a process. This process involves learning (what I hope you'll do here), growing, falling, changing, becoming convinced again of the truth, and developing holiness over our lifetimes. With that in mind, don't expect that this book will make you instantly holy. Only God through His Holy Spirit can make you holy, and He's not going to operate according to our hurried lifestyle.

Hope in Christ Alone

As we begin this journey together, let me remind you of a truth that I'm sure you already know. *God changes hearts.* Our loving heavenly Father has committed Himself to our growth. In fact, He's given us everything we need for life and godliness. He's given us every tool we need to fight against our idols and to grow in grace; not only that, He's committed all the resources of heaven to His goal:



- He's given us Jesus Christ, our Advocate who atones for our sin, frees us from sin's bondage, and prays for us.
- He's endowed us with His Holy Spirit, who indwells us and guides us into truth. He's poured out His sovereign grace upon us, grace that enables us to desire to do His will and become pleasing to Him.
- He's provided us with the Word of Truth: truth that illumines our hearts to all the wisdom that we need to change in a way that pleases Him. He's done this for the ultimate goal of changing us—and all for His glory!

In 1998 I took a twelve-day tour visiting the idols of the Orient. You too have begun a journey—but it will probably take longer than twelve days . . . so settle in for the journey and rejoice in the knowledge that God will use His Word and His Spirit to reveal your idols and develop wholehearted love and devotion in you—all for His glory and praise!



Rachel's Gods and You

Little children, guard yourselves from idols.
1 John 5:21

“Go get your things.¹ You and Leah get the children and get ready to go,” her husband commanded. “We’re leaving tonight.” “Tonight? Right now? But I’m not ready!” Rachel loved her husband, but she also enjoyed the blessing of living near her parents. Even though she enjoyed the closeness of the families, things weren’t always peaceful between them. It seemed as though there was continual strife between her husband and her father. And now, the event she had dreaded was transpiring.

“Don’t forget your cloak,” she told Joseph. “Stop bickering with the other children, and gather up your things.” In the same ways that you and I would, Rachel gathered up all the household items that were important to her. Then,



in the midst of her frenzy, reality set in and a chill ran through her heart. I'm really leaving my home . . . everything I've ever known. How can I know that I'll be cared for? How can I know that I'll be safe? How can I get along without my father's protection . . . without his gods? And so, when her father had left home to go work in the field, she went into his house and stole his household idols from him. Although she didn't realize it at the time, her actions would soon jeopardize her family and bring about another act of deception. Instead of bringing security, these idols would place her family at risk. Instead of blessing her, they would be a curse.

A Familiar Story

We've all read the story of Rachel's theft in Genesis 31. Although this is the first time idols are mentioned in the Bible, it would be easy to pass over it and miss the enormity of the act and its consequences: Rachel stole from her father. She took his gods. She deceived her husband and endangered her family. Later, when Laban, her father, questioned her about the disappearance of his idols, she deceived him again.

I've often wondered why she thought she had to have those idols. What did they mean to her? Why was she willing to do what she did? Why were they so powerful in her life?

In order to answer these questions, let's look at Rachel's life. We know the Bible says that "Rachel was beautiful of form and face" (Gen. 29:17). In today's vernacular, Rachel was a real knockout. Rachel undoubtedly knew that when it came to feminine charms, she had her sister Leah beat hands down. She must have relished the favor that was hers. She was so beautiful that when Jacob first laid eyes on her, he knew she was the one for

him. In their first meeting she captured his heart, and he served her father fourteen years for her.² In fact, he loved her so much that the years he spent working to secure her for himself “seemed to him but a few days” (Gen. 29:20). That’s real devotion! With a beginning like this, you would think that the rest of Rachel’s life would have been a bed of roses. She was beautiful, and she had her husband’s love . . . what else could she possibly want?

“Give Me Children!”

As time went by the answer to that question became evident. What more could she possibly want? Children! She had to sit idly by while her elder sister Leah gave birth to six sons . . . and still Rachel was barren. Every time one of those boys cried, whenever Jacob played with one of them, Rachel’s jealousy must have grown. She must have been filled with anger and self-pity as she felt her favored position was eroding.

“Give me children, or else I die!” she finally cried despairingly. “Am I in the place of God?” Jacob angrily retorted (Gen. 30:1–2). Rachel’s desire for children was so strong that it had twisted her thinking. She began to believe that it was Jacob rather than God who was controlling her fertility, her position, her life.

In time, God graciously gave Rachel a son. Although she was temporarily filled with joy at his birth, she wasn’t content. Her heart was revealed by her statement “May the LORD give me another son” (Gen. 30:24). Even her choice of the name Joseph means “let Him add another.” Rachel wasn’t satisfied with the blessing that God had given her in Joseph. She wanted more.

Rachel did eventually conceive again, and as she was dying in childbirth, she named this son Benoni, which means “son of my sorrow.” What she had worshiped and thought would bring



her blessing ended up causing her death. What she thought would bring her joy brought her sorrow instead. It is ironic, isn't it, that the woman who cried, "Give me children or I'll die!" died in childbirth?

You see, even before Rachel stole her father's idols she was an idolater. Her desire to have children like her sister Leah was the most important thing in her life. It was something she believed that she had to have, and so it was her god.

Rachel's Gods

It's not hard to imagine that Rachel had always been the center of attention, that life had always gone her way. She probably wasn't used to Leah having a position of favor over her. Because of her infertility and everything it represented to her, Rachel had come face to face with an insurmountable problem—something she may have never experienced before. She feared that she had to take steps to protect her position. She believed her father's gods would somehow bless her, so she took them. Perhaps she believed that there might be a God who ruled over the earth, but He was too far away and too unmanageable for her comfort. She couldn't trust Him to order life as she desired. She needed a tamer, more docile god—one she could control. She wanted a god that would give her what she needed. She wanted a god she could steal; one she could hide!³ She wanted a god she could keep in her purse.

My Household Idols

As I've thought about Rachel's story, I've wondered about my household idols. I've wondered whether I have any domestic deities—household gods that I'm looking to for my happiness and security. What do I long for so much that my heart clamors, "Give

me *this*, or else I'll die!" What must I have for life to be meaningful or happy? If I answer that question with anything other than God Himself, then that's what functions as a god for me.

Even though we don't bow down to stone statues or make bowls of food to set before our gods, we worship idols in other ways. John Calvin commented on this when he wrote,

When [Moses] relates that Rachel stole her father's idols, he is speaking of a vice that was common. From this we may gather that man's nature . . . is a perpetual *factory of idols* (emphasis added).⁴

Idols aren't just stone statues. No, idols are the thoughts, desires, longings, and expectations that we worship in the place of the true God. Idols cause us to ignore the true God in search of what we think we need.

Covenantal Gods

In some ways, the relationship that we have with these false gods is similar to the relationship that we have with the true God. We look to these gods to bless us. Rachel would say, *If I have children like my sister Leah, I'll be happy*. We might say, *If I have a godly spouse or If my children excel in school, I'll be happy*. Of course having godly relationships is a blessing and a source of happiness, and there is nothing sinful in desiring them; but if they are the source of our joy . . . if they take top priority in our lives, then they are our gods. That's why Jesus said, "Seek first [God's] kingdom" (Matt. 6:33). If God is the top priority in our lives, everything else will fall into place. It's then that these beloved blessings will fade in importance and God will take His rightful place in our hearts.



Let's look more closely at how the worship of false gods plays out in our lives.

"Give Me a Godly Husband, or I'll Die!"

Jenny believed that the only way for her to be happy was to have a godly husband. She was married to a Christian man who attended church with her, but she wanted a husband who would pray regularly with her and who would have devotions with the family. I agreed with her that it would have been a blessing for him to be a more godly leader. I tried to encourage him to find other men who might help him grow.

As I got to know Jenny, I saw that her desire for a godly husband functioned like a god in her life. The thought *I must have a godly husband or I'll die!* ruled her. Sometimes she thought that if she was extra nice and made him the dinner that he liked, he would be obligated to do what she wanted. On other days she would give up in frustration and anger, withholding herself from him and pouting. Like Rachel, she was convinced that she could not find happiness unless her expectations were met. A day came when she told me that she was going to leave him. She left him and the church, and the last that I heard she was no longer following Christ. Like Rachel, her desire ended up destroying her.

Venerated Blessings

An integral part of false worship is learning how to get false gods to give us what we want. In essence, we make covenants with them, expecting them to bless us if we act in certain ways.

For instance, if good health is a god to you, you might think: *If I exercise every day and eat properly, I'll never get sick.* If having meaningful employment is a god to you, you might think: *If I'm*

always the first at my desk and always doing more than is required of me, then my employer will be obligated to notice me and protect my job. Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that it is wrong to make nice dinners for your husband, exercise properly, or work diligently. If motivated by love of God and others, each of these things can be good. But these actions become sinful when you do them primarily to satisfy your desires instead of to please God. The only holy reason for doing any good is the love of God and others.

I can imagine that you might be wondering, *Okay, Elyse, how can I tell if I'm worshiping the blessings that I desire or God?* Although we're going to look at that question in more depth in following chapters, let me summarize in this way: *If you're willing to sin to obtain your goal or if you sin when you don't get what you want, then your desire has taken God's place and you're functioning as an idolater.*

Remember how Rachel sinned? She was sinfully angry with her husband; she stole her father's gods and deceived her family. She wasn't content with the birth of Joseph but wanted more. It wasn't idolatrous for Rachel to desire children. No, she was idolatrous because her desire for children was the foremost desire in her heart. "Give me children, or else I die!" is the cry of an idolater.

Think again about the most important command. Jesus said that the primary love in your heart has to be centered on God. Anything less than that is idolatry. If you work very hard at your job and are still passed over for the promotion, your response will reveal whether you're serving God or worshiping an idol. Is God and your love for Him more important than your job? Or if you make a nice dinner for your husband and he ignores you, watches television, and goes to bed, and you get angry and cry or pout or look for ways to punish him, you can know that your love for God isn't the predominant love in your life.



Certain Curses

It's in the covenantal nature of worship to believe that your god can bless or curse you. Rachel believed that barrenness was a curse that was intolerable. We know that because she was willing to give up anything, including her holiness, to avoid it. That's always how idols function in our hearts. We sell ourselves to them, and we believe that the loss of them is an unbearable affliction—a curse. That's why they are so powerful in our lives.

There is a curse involved in idolatry, but it isn't because we don't get what we want. The curse is that we're trusting in something other than God to make us happy. Consider Jeremiah 17:5–6:

Thus says the LORD,
“Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind
And makes flesh his strength,
And whose heart turns away from the LORD.
“For he will be like a bush in the desert
And will not see when prosperity comes,
But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness,
A land of salt without inhabitant.”

What do you notice about the man who trusts in something other than God? He's never satisfied. He's like a thirsty bush in the desert, a bramble in the wilderness. What could be more dissatisfying?

I recently took a Jeep tour into the Sonoran desert. Although it was springtime and it had rained recently, that desert was desolate. Our guide kept telling us to be careful because there were no friendly plants or animals there. In fact, everything that grew there was dangerous to get near. There were thorns on one cactus that

had microscopic reverse barbs—if you even brushed by them, they would grab you. Other cactus had three-inch thorns so sharp and strong that you could push them through four folds of denim with ease. This was a wilderness, a land without inhabitant. Although I enjoyed our little trip, I must admit that I was glad to get back into that Jeep and head for civilization. It wasn't anyplace I'd like to live permanently, that's certain. The Bible teaches that when I center my trust and love on myself, my desires, or anything other than God—that's exactly where I live . . . in the desert.

It would be a curse to be forced to live in the desert, wouldn't it? The person who trusts in or loves anything more than God is cursed because he's so focused on what he wants that he doesn't even notice when good things happen. All he can see is what he wants. That's because his heart has turned away from loving the Lord, and he loves something else more. And that's why Rachel could have the undivided love of her husband and give birth to a healthy baby boy and say, "I want more." Rachel lived in a desert in more than one way. She lived in a desert created by her desires. Her life was miserable, sad, futile, and hopeless. The worship of idols is the reason we're discontented, and it's why we disobey God. And Calvin says that our hearts manufacture them.

Bury Your Idols

What did Rachel eventually do with her idols? You'll be glad that they probably ended up buried under a tree. Jacob charged his family to return to God. "Put away the foreign gods which are among you," he told his family. "So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had . . . and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem" (Gen. 35:2, 4). We can hope that Rachel surrendered her false gods at her husband's command.



Even though she died soon after, there's no reason to believe that she held on to them in spite of her husband's command. Perhaps God delivered Rachel from her belief that she needed something other than Him—perhaps He turned her heart to trust only in Him.

You, too, can rest today knowing that as you, by His grace, respond to your heavenly Husband's command to surrender your idols, He'll bury them under another tree. By His power He can bury all of our false gods under the most awesome and glorious tree ever . . . the one on Golgotha's mount.

Is Rachel's story relevant to you and me? Yes, it is—because idolatry didn't end with her. This problem continues on into the church today. We must remember John's final words, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). His warning to "beware of" or "watch against" false worship is lost on us if we don't comprehend how our hearts manufacture idols.

God calls us to bury our false gods at the cross. It's in union with Jesus Christ, the one who hung on Golgotha's tree, that we have the power to conquer all our idolatry and bury our gods in the blood-soaked ground beneath His cross.

Only God the Heart Knower is also the Heart Changer. The God who knows and loves us completely, more than we can comprehend, also knows all our desires and the place that they occupy in our love. It is He who is the Heart Changer. The writer of Hebrews said,

And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. . . . For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet

without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:13, 15–16)

Every desire in our heart, whether idolatrous in essence or idolatrous because of our inordinate love for it, is known to our Father. Everything is “open and laid bare” before Him, and He knows us thoroughly. He knows every time that we put something before Him, that we love something more than we love Him. If that were the end of the story, we would despair, wouldn't we? Praise God that the passage goes on to say that our dear Savior, our High Priest, sympathizes with our weaknesses. He understands our diluted worship and implores us to draw near to Him, so that we might “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We desperately need His mercy and help in our conflict with idolatry . . . and He's promised to give it. So, focus all your hope and trust on Him. I know that He'll prove Himself a faithful High Priest, granting you the help you need to develop a heart and life wholly focused on loving and worshiping Him.

When you find yourself worried, angry, or fearful, like Rachel, you can rest knowing that you don't need to grab an idol off a shelf or find some other way to take care of yourself. God's mercy and grace is available to you every moment—and His promised help is as certain as His character. You can step toward Him . . . He knows you and what you worship . . . and He's more than able to sustain you in your time of need. So, go ahead, and draw near to Him with confidence. You'll find that He's full of sympathy and more than able to support and change you.



For Further Thought

1. Think about the story of Rachel and Leah. If you aren't familiar with it, you can read it beginning in Genesis 29. Do you identify more with Rachel or Leah? How does God's dealings with both of them comfort or encourage you?
2. Think about the areas of your life in which you struggle with sin. Can you see any connection between your habitual sin and any possible idolatry? If so, write it down. If not, don't be dismayed; the Lord will help you see if there are any idols in your heart.
3. Is there anything in your life that you think you must have? How would you complete this sentence: "Give me _____ or I die!" Are you looking to some earthly Jacob to satisfy you?
4. Write out a prayer of commitment stating your desire to understand how your heart might manufacture idols.