

NO OTHER GODS

The first of the ten commandments is: *"You shall have no other gods besides me."* How sad that such a commandment is necessary! Wouldn't you think that any rational person would know that there could be only one supreme being? And that this being would have to be eternal and the originator of all things?

But God, who knows us so well, not only knew that we would worship other gods, but knew how we would make them. Hence the second commandment: *"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God ..."* You shall not make a god and worship it. Doesn't that sound absurd? How could a person or a group of people worship as god something that they have just made? But it did happen in Bible times and it happens today.

A stunning story about idol worship is the incident that took place at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses was up the mountain communing with God (Exodus 32). The Israelites, worried that something may have happened to their leader, urged Aaron to make a god who could lead them. From their gold earrings he made an idol in the shape of a calf. The people said, "This is our god who brought us up out of Egypt." Isn't that incredible? How could something newly made have brought them out of Egypt over a year before it existed? And what power is there in a statue, no matter when it was made?

In chapter 44 of his book, the prophet Isaiah, prompted by the Holy Spirit, writes a stunning comparison of God and idols. First comes the clear statement that there is only one God. *"This is what the Lord says – Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. Who then is like me? Let them proclaim it. Let them declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come – yes, let them foretell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God beside me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one"* (verses 6-8).

Then comes God's opinion of idol makers. *All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit nothing? People like that will be put to shame; skilled workers are only human. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy* (vs. 9-11).

Now comes a description of the craftsmen diligently at work. I can almost see them wiping their brow as they press on to complete their task. *The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is used as fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it* (vs. 12-15).

I picture Isaiah as really bothered by what he was being asked to write. Couldn't the carpenter see what he was doing? Shaking his head, Isaiah repeats the main points a second and then a third time, perhaps so that we, his readers, would notice the absurdity. *Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so that they cannot see, and their minds closed so that they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I*

bow down to a block of wood?" Such people feed on ashes, a deluded heart misleads them; they cannot save themselves, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?" (vs. 16-20).

It does seem ridiculous, doesn't it? Bowing down to a block of wood! Now comes the contrast, a description of God our Creator and Redeemer, the one who is active in the earthly, political realm as well. *This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," of the towns of Judah, "They shall be built," and of their ruins, "I will restore them," who says to the watery deep, "Be dry, and I will dry up your streams," who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please"; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid" (vs. 24-28).*

What should our response be to our God in this matter? God himself lets us know as the story continues: *This is what the Lord says – he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited – he says: "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.' I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (45:18,19,22).*

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Years ago I saw an article in the newspaper about a god in the garden. The accompanying photograph showed a man pointing out a rock on which a face had been painted. To the family in whose garden the rock was placed, this was a god to be worshiped. I cut out the picture and story to serve as an example in my Bible teaching. I do not find such articles interesting; rather, to me, they are incredibly sad. Like Isaiah, I find it hard to believe that people would actually worship an object that somebody made.

I don't know who first made an idol and called it god, but the practice of worshiping other gods was well underway before the time of the patriarchs. We are clearly told that Terah, Abraham's father, was one who worshiped other gods (Joshua 24:2). Rachel and Leah grew up in such a home. When Jacob decided to take his wives and children and get away from his father-in-law Laban, Rachel stole her father's household gods (Genesis 31:19).

When Laban realized what had happened, he chased after the fleeing people. "Why did you steal my gods?" he asked Jacob, who knew nothing of his wife's theft. Two things here are beyond my imagination: multiple gods and labeling as god something that could be picked up and stolen. Rachel's skillful deceit led Laban to go back home empty handed and the household gods to go with the family into the land that God promised would one day be theirs.

Even after the exodus from Egypt, where through the plagues God had clearly shown the multitude of Egyptian gods to be powerless, and after the ten commandments were given, some Israelites followed the practice of making and worshiping idols. A stunning example is given in Judges 17 and 18. The book of Judges covers a period of several hundred years between settling the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership and having kings as leaders. It was a lawless time, as the text will tell. The story involves people from three of the tribes of Israel: Ephraim, Levi and Dan, and starts with a strange interchange between a man named Micah and his mother.

Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse – I have that silver with me; I took it." Then his mother said, "The Lord bless you, my son!" When he returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, she said, "I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. I will give it back to you." So he returned the silver to his

mother, and she took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to a silversmith, who made them into the image and the idol. And they were put in Micah's house (17:1-4).

Now we find out that idol worship was already well established in Micah's house: *Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest. In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit (17:5,6).*

And now a man from the tribe of Levi enters the story. The Levites had been designated by God through Moses to assist the people in worshipping the Lord. Instead of having a section of land as their own, the Levites lived in cities scattered among the other tribes. *A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who had been living within the clan of Judah, left that town in search of some other place to stay. On his way he came to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim. Micah asked him, "Where are you from?" "I'm a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah," he said, "and I'm looking for a place to stay." Then Micah said to him, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food." So the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man was to him like one of his own sons. Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house (17:7-12).*

Micah actually thought the Lord would commend him for his action! Listen: *And Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest" (17:13).*

It took time for the Israelites to settle the Promised Land, for it was already populated with people who needed to be dislodged, to a large extent because of their idol worship! God knew that if the inhabitants of the land were allowed to live among the Israelites, his people would soon pick up their habits and lose their distinctiveness, especially that of worshipping one God. All local idols were to be destroyed in settling the land and the places of worship demolished.

In those days, Israel had no king. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking a place of their own where they might settle, because they had not yet come into an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. So the Danites sent five warriors from Zorah and Eshtaol to spy out the land and explore it. These men represented all their clans. They told them, "Go, explore the land." So they entered the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah where they spent the night. When they were near Micah's house, they recognized the voice of the young Levite; so they turned in there and asked him, "Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? Why are you here?" He told them what Micah had done for him, and said, "He has hired me and I am his priest." Then they said to him, "Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful." The priest answered them, "Go in peace. Your journey has the Lord's approval" (18:1-6).

These five men, who desired God's blessing, left to locate a site for their new home. They found just what they wanted, a wonderful place. Then they returned home and gave the good report, giving glory to God. *Then six hundred men from the clan of the Danites, armed for battle, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol. From there they went on to the hill country of Ephraim and came to Micah's house. Then the five men who had spied out the land of Laish said to the members of their clan, "Do you know that one of these houses has an ephod, other household gods, a carved image and a cast idol? Now you know what to do" (18:11, 13, 14).*

Every time I arrive at this point when reading the story, I think, "Yes! I know exactly what they are going to do. They will destroy those idols and perhaps even kill Micah and the Levite. They will do everything possible to rid Israel of idolatry." And every time I am stunned by what actually happens: *So they turned in there and went to the house of the young Levite at Micah's place and greeted him. The six hundred Danites, armed for battle, stood at the entrance to the gate. The five men who had spied out the land went inside and took the carved image, the ephod, and other household gods and the cast idol while the priest and the six hundred armed men stood at the entrance to the gate. When the five went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, and other household gods and the cast idol, the priest said*

to them, *"What are you doing?" They answered him, "Be quiet! Don't say a word. Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one person's household?" Then the priest was glad. He took the ephod, the other household goods and the carved image and went along with the people. Putting their little children, their livestock and their possessions in front of them, they turned away and left (18:15-21).*

Micah, of course, soon found out what happened and took action. *When they had gone some distance from Micah's house, those who lived near Micah were called together and overtook the Danites. As they shouted after them, the Danites turned and said to Micah, "What's the matter with you that you called out our men to fight?" He replied, "You took the gods I made, and my priest, and went away. What else do I have? How can you ask, 'What's the matter with you?' " The Danites answered, "Don't argue with us, or some hot-heads will attack you, and you and your family will lose your lives." So the Danites went their way, and Micah, seeing that they were too strong for him, turned around and went back home (18:22-26).*

*"You took the gods I made ... You took the gods I made ..." How I wish everyone in the world could see the absurdity and the deep sorrow in those words as I see them! If so, idol worship would be a thing of the past. Instead people would worship the One who is spirit, the One who cannot possibly be represented by an image, the One the prophet Isaiah speaks of in his book: *This is what the Lord says: "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, so that they came into being?" declares the Lord (Isaiah 66:1,2).* Oh, that we would worship the Creator instead of something we created beings have dared to create!*

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When Joshua was nearing the end of his life, he summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of all the tribes of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. The story is told in Joshua 24. First he gave a summary of the history of the Israelites, starting with the fact that their ancestors, including Terah, worshiped other gods. He mentioned how the family went down to Egypt and how God had delivered them, brought them through the wilderness, across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. There the Lord fought for them so that victory was theirs. Now they were settling down in cities they did not build and eating from vineyards and olive groves that they did not plant.

And then Joshua issued a challenge to them: *"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (24:14,15).*

Joshua had earned the right to serve as an example for the Israelites. He had climbed Mt. Sinai with Moses, stopping part way up as Moses continued to the top to meet with God. The two rejoined on the way down, Moses with the ten commandments in his hands. Thus Joshua had nothing to do with the golden calf incident. Later, Joshua was one of the twelve spies sent to look over the Promised Land after two year in the wilderness. Along with Caleb, Joshua expressed confidence that God could give them the land. Because the people believed the ten fearful spies, Joshua had no choice but to remain with them for the additional 38 years in the wilderness. His time was well spent, though, for he served as an aide to Moses. What a mentor! When God told Moses that Joshua was to succeed him as leader of the people, both of them were prepared for a easy turnover of power. And so it was! Joshua capably led the people in conquering and settling the land, always relying on the Lord. Now here he was, still vowing his allegiance to the Lord. His spirit was contagious.

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from the land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the

nations through which we all travelled. And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God" (24:16-18).

Joshua wanted to make sure the leaders understood the seriousness of their vow, so he goaded them a bit. *Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the Lord." Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord." "Yes, we are witnesses," they replied. "Now then," said Joshua, "Throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him" (24:19-24).*

Joshua then made a covenant for the people, recorded everything in the Book of Law of God, and set up a stone of witness as a reminder of the covenant. Now Joshua could die in peace; he had done everything he could to lead the people in the ways of the Lord. It would be up to them whether or not they would keep their promise.

Looking back over my life, I realize I was one who answered Joshua's challenge in the affirmative. Had I been there when he said, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord," I would have said, "We will, too." At the time when I was considering marriage, the top qualifications on my list were that my future husband would have a strong personal faith in God and that he would want to raise any children we may have in the faith. Leo was looking for a wife with the same qualifications. Both of us have served the Lord our God for the more than fifty years since we met and later, married. Our five children also have strong personal relationships with God and have believing spouses. Our eleven grandchildren are being raised in the faith, much to our delight.

And so I join Joshua in saying: Choose this day whom you will serve. We recommend that you choose the Lord!

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In many of the Bible passages where God is compared to idols, the fact of God as Creator is used to differentiate the two. This is not surprising, since the first thing God lets us know about himself in the Bible is that he made the heavens and the earth. Nobody – and certainly no thing! – can come close to duplicating that feat. Listen to what God says through the prophet Jeremiah, especially noting the contrasts and feeling the passion behind the words and images:

Hear what the Lord says to you, O house of Israel. This is what the Lord says: "Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them. For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of a forest, and a skilled worker shapes it with a chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good." No one is like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among the wise counselors of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you. They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols. Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. What the goldsmith and engraver have made is then dressed in blue and purple – all made by skilled workers. But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath. "Tell them this: 'These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.' " But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses. Everyone is senseless and without knowledge; all goldsmiths are shamed by their idols. Their

images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgment comes, they will perish. He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like these, for he is the Maker of all things, including Israel, the tribe of his inheritance – the Lord Almighty is his name (Jeremiah 10:1-16).

“God is the Maker of all things,” Jeremiah says. Early in the Church Age the believers felt it necessary to compile from the Scriptures official statements of faith, some of which have survived and are still recited in churches today. The earliest, the Apostles’ Creed, opens with “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” The Nicene Creed, from the fourth century, expands on the first statement: “... maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” I wonder if we realize the power behind those words. Once a whole crew of idol-worshiping sailors was converted by hearing about God the Creator. These words were also backed by a powerful demonstration of God’s creative ability and by a personal testimony, making them hard to resist. The story is told in the first chapter of Jonah.

There we meet the prophet Jonah, who was being given an assignment that he did not like. Notice his reaction. *The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord (1:1-3).*

The Lord knew exactly where Jonah was and took action: *Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up (1:4).* The sailors had never seen a storm quite like this one and did everything they could to counteract it: *All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish” (1:5,6).*

The storm continued to rage, so the crew tried to discover the source of the problem: *Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell to Jonah. So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.” This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so) (1:7-10).*

To his credit, Jonah was honest with them about what he was doing. When he mentioned that he worshiped the maker of the sea and land, it seemed true to them. Certainly the Maker of the sea could cause an unusual storm, if he wished. What they could not understand is why Jonah would try to run away from a God like that!

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?” “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.” Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried to the Lord, “O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.” Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him (1:11-15).

When the storm suddenly stopped as soon as Jonah hit the water, the men were overwhelmed. Filled with a healthy respect and reverence for the Lord, they not only sacrificed but also made vows to God. I wonder what those vows were? I would think they included the promise to get rid of their idols and to tell others about God the Creator. How could they do less than that? I look forward to talking with those sailors when I get to Heaven!

I wonder if the crew ever found out on earth what happened to Jonah? I'm glad we know the rest of the story: *But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights (1:17).*

I have no problem with taking this story literally. Whether God created a new fish able to contain Jonah or whether he brought an already existing fish into the vicinity, nothing is too hard for God, Maker of heaven and earth. Inside the fish, Jonah had plenty of time to think and pray. One beautiful prayer is recorded for us: *He said, "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.' The engulfing waters threatened me, and deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord" (2:2-9).*

"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs," Jonah says. Isn't that sad? Does it stir in you a sympathy for idol worshipers, as it does in me? Do you wonder also what vows Jonah made while in the fish? I wonder if he said, "Lord, if you give me another chance to go to Nineveh, I'll go." Because that's what happened. The Lord commanded the fish and it spit Jonah out onto dry land. Soon thereafter Jonah was on his way to Nineveh. This was an evil, wicked city, center of an empire that wanted to conquer Israel. The message Jonah was given to proclaim was, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed." Jonah's fear was that the Ninevites might repent and be spared from God's judgment, and that, too, is exactly what happened. Jonah was so angry he sat outside the city and sulked.

The last portion of Jonah's story tells so much about the character of God, our Creator: *Jonah prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? This is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." But the Lord replied, "Have you any right to be angry?" Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.*

But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this vine, thought you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (4:2-11). What a wonderful, loving, compassionate, powerful, gracious God we have! Why, oh why would we want any gods besides him?

We don't know much about Jonah besides this incident, but Jesus did use Jonah and the Ninevites as examples in his teaching, as in Matthew 12:38-41: *Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with*

this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.”

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The apostle Paul in his travels came face to face with idol worship many times. In Acts 17, for example, we are told of his arrival in Athens. While waiting for his coworkers to join him, Paul did some sight-seeing, and was distressed to see that the city was full of idols. He began to talk about God to anyone who would listen. As the Athenians loved to hear new ideas, they arranged for Paul to address a meeting of the Areopagus. What an opportunity for Paul! I can well imagine his thinking through the sermon he would deliver, praying all the while for wisdom.

When the time came, Paul gave what I consider to be a well thought out introduction: *Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (17:22,23).*

What I like about this is that Paul does not scold the Athenians for their idol worship. Instead he shows an interest in their culture and seems to commend them for being religious. Paul always worked from a plan. He wanted to present the gospel to them; and a scolding would have closed their ears to the message. Besides, Paul was the one who wrote to the Romans: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)*. People who are not condemned by God should not become condemners of others, should we?

I have mentioned the distress I feel when reading the stories of idol worship, whether in the Bible or in newspapers. Paul felt the same distress, but he also saw idolatry as an opportunity to advance the kingdom of God. At least these people were religious; they responded to the need for worship that God put within each one of us. This way of thinking kept Paul more than balanced; it turned his distress into joy. It can do the same for me, for you. Micah, the Danites, the family with the stone idol in the garden, the ancient Egyptians and Israelites and all who are currently caught up in idol worship need conversion, not condemnation; they need a relationship with God, not just religion. They need to know that worship isn't the only thing that matters; the object of our worship is of supreme importance.

Now let's listen to Paul's sermon along with the Athenians. Notice that he starts with God as creator. *“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (17:24-31).*

The reaction of the crowd varied. Some sneered; some were intrigued and wanted to hear more at another time; and some became believers! For them the choice was clear: no more idol worship; they would worship God their creator and have no other gods besides him. How Paul must have rejoiced that day! For those, like Paul, who have decided to love God to the exclusion of all other gods, there is no greater joy than seeing others make the same decision.

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My God says: You shall have no other gods besides me.
My heart responds: I certainly won't!

May that be your response as well. Amen.

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