

Isaiah 46:1-7

¹Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary. ²They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden, they themselves go off into captivity. ³"Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. ⁴Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you. ⁵"With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? ⁶Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. ⁷They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles.



Discuss

This passage comes from the Old Testament, the scriptures Jesus would have grown up hearing and reading (for example, he reads from Isaiah in Luke 4:16-21). Isaiah is a prophet: someone who *forth-tells* truth more than *foretells* it, meaning he often is speaking the truth to power more than predicting the future. In this case, God is about to allow a large empire to take over Israel because Israel has worshiped other gods and abused the vulnerable in their society. Isaiah is bringing his message to the leaders of Israel to warn them and to call them to turn back to trusting God alone.

1) This passage is highly poetic, so words and images are very important. Look at how Isaiah observes Bel's and Nebo's behavior – they were two ancient false gods Israel made into idols (vv. 1-2). Contrast this with how God cares for his people (vv. 3-4). What differences between the idols and God do you notice? Who is a burden? Who is carrying God's people?

2) In versus 5 to 7, Isaiah describes the common ancient practice of using gold to make an idol which is then carried to a spot, set in place and worshipped, hoping it will save God's people from their trouble. How is God's power and ability described differently than an idol's in verses 3 to 4 (note that "descendants of Jacob" is a way of talking about Israel since Jacob's sons became the twelve tribes)?

Apply

We might not make idols out of gold anymore, but just like God's people, we feel vulnerable. We feel weak and exposed to various personal, societal and perhaps global hardships. In this experience, an idol is anything we turn to, hoping to relieve our vulnerability and increase our sense of being able to act. Put simply, idols offer us control when things feel out of control.¹

1) Think about TV, relationships, sex, your phone, food, even exercise. Are you using any of these things to deal with the pain of having our vulnerability exposed? Are you seeking to gain control through any of these?

2) The only person who can truly carry our burdens is God himself. Peter, Jesus' disciple, tells us to bring our burdens to Jesus: "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7). Read again God's promise to his people in verse 4. Then, take a moment in silence to close your eyes and ask God to show you how he's carrying you and those you care for. Try this daily for a week.

¹I'm grateful for the wisdom and insight Andy Crouch brings to examining our modern idols in pp. 92-99 in *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).