

# Isaiah's Scorn of Idolatry

SERMON

A Sermon Preached on October 29, 1923,  
in the First Presbyterian Church, Princeton, N. J.

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"He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image; he falleth down unto it and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god" (Isa. 44:16, 17).

**T**HIS passage expresses the scorn of the prophet for idolatry. And it would be harder to find more scathing irony in all literature. Nothing could possibly be more completely plain.

Yet even plainness such as this requires in the reader some receptiveness of soul. It might seem impossible for anyone to misunderstand; yet modern men do succeed in doing so. I remember a sermon which I heard a few years ago. It introduced those verses which voice the scorn of the ancient prophet for the man who makes an idol by cutting off a piece of a stick of wood. "He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god." Such words, it might be thought, are plain enough; surely it is impossible to misunderstand. But what did our modern friend make of these devastating words? "These are very useful verses," he said in effect; "they show that the church should satisfy the material as well as the spiritual needs of man. That artificer of whom the prophet speaks made a god out of his stick, and that is well; but he also made a fire of it and roasted meat, and that also is well. So we should emulate him; we should in our church have worship—that element is well enough if it be kept in its proper place—but we should also have material service; in worshiping the god we should not neglect the making of the fire and the roasting of the meat."

It might seem impossible that such interpretation, in this supposedly enlightened age, should actually exist; yet exist it does, and it threatens to dominate our modern religious world. Prejudice and narrow obscurantism in the false garb of freedom are everywhere at work. They have produced their garbled or Shorter Bibles—I suppose *Paradise Lost* could be reduced to banality if the words in it were merely chosen and combined anew to suit the modern reader—they have produced their alleged translations of the Bible which are not translations but falsifications. The Bible under such treatment is becoming a book with seven seals. When will it be rediscovered? When will men again read it as it is, with all its scathing rebuke to human pride, with all its exaltation of the living God? We cannot say when the blessed day will come. But one thing is clear—if the Word of God again were heard, there would be an upheaval like the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Now, as at the end of the Middle Ages, the Bible is obscured by an interpretation which really reverses its meaning; and now as well as then the rediscovery of the Bible would set the world free. That would be a beneficent upheaval; it would mean a grounding of the social edifice no longer upon the shifting sands of utilitarianism, but upon the rock of God's commands.

The fine scorn of Isaiah is not without interest at the present time. It is directed, indeed, against idolatry, and no one would seem to be in danger of idolatry today. But the glorious thing about the polemic of the Bible is that it is not merely negative. The Bible tears down only in order that it may build a better building upon the ruins of that which has been beneficently destroyed. So it is with this chapter. The prophet denounces idolatry not out of a mere love of denunciation, but because idolatry does despite to a positive thing that fires the prophet's soul. The prophet's scorn for what is false is a generous thing because it springs from a profound love of what is true. Idolatry

is denounced because of devotion to the living God. The great underlying question of this chapter is the question whether we shall worship a god of our own making or the God by whom we have been made.

The question is very much alive today. We have not idolatry in the narrower sense, but of the making of gods there is no end. Turning from the living and true God, like Israel of old, we have preferred a god who will be content to serve our ends. We have built a fire and roasted roast, and we have promoted religion; and both operations are often on the same low utilitarian plane. Religion, men say, is a useful thing; it must be promoted in the interests of the state or in the interests of the community; God is the servant of man. Instead of seeking God first and testing our plans by His revealed will, we make our plans first and drag God in to help us carry them out. Religion ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a mere means to an end. Instead of the facts about God being the basis of religious experience, religious experience is made the basis of the supposed facts.

As I was walking through the streets of one of our large cities a year or so ago I saw, not an altar with this inscription "To An Unknown God," but a church with a huge sign in front of it to the effect: "Not A Member? Come on in and help make this a better community." That is modern religion with a vengeance. It was an appeal not to sinners to seek salvation at the hands of God, but to persons, whose purposes are already all that they should be, to use religion as a mere means to accomplish their humanitarian ends. Many preachers and laymen today are busily engaged in calling the righteous to repentance. And it is just as futile an effort now as it was when our Lord first recited it in the days of His flesh.

Men are not interested in the facts about God, but in what use they can make of their thoughts about Him. Creeds may vary, men say; but a man can make any creed effective in his life. Theology, they tell us, is a

mere expression of Christian experience; it is a mere interpretation of an attitude of the human soul. At the present time we may still find it useful, men say in effect, to conceive of God as a person; but there may come a time when some other conception may serve better the needs of men. Of course such pragmatism is really skeptical to the core; it is nothing but a dismal skepticism which instead of having the honest courage of its own negations decks itself out in the now meaningless language of devotion. But it is all in vain. God is quite useless if He exists only in idea. If a man regards the belief in a personal God as a mere interpretation of experience, useful only to this generation and destined to pass away as the forms of men's thought change, then even in this generation he no longer really believes in a personal God at all. Men say that we must not hold a static conception of religion; but, after all, facts, despite all our fine words, if they be real facts, are never subject to change. We may correct our errors; but if we have ever attained to truth the truth will remain true for millions upon millions upon millions of years. Shall we give up the search for truth? That is the real religious question of the day. Shall we content ourselves with the meaningless pastime of formulating creeds which are intended only to be useful and not to be true? Or has God spoken and revealed the truth?

We Christians think that He has. He has, it is true, revealed but a little. We are but finite creatures, and God has not destroyed us by showing us the full splendors of His being. Certainly the things that we know not are vastly greater than the things that we know. There are many questions which we can never answer. I received a letter in yesterday morning's mail from a gentleman in New York, a stranger to me, who appeals to me "as a religious teacher" to reconcile the awful facts of earthquakes and tidal waves with an Overruling Providence. And a stamped enveloped is enclosed for reply! No, my friends, there are some things that God has not revealed. God has not invited us finite creatures to sit at the council table of the universe. He rules all things yet in accordance with His mysterious will. "Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel and who

instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding?"

But despite this infinity of mystery, there are some things that God has revealed; some things even with regard to the most mysterious of God's acts. We cannot explain the purpose of the earthquake and the fire; but we have been told some things about them. We have had our complacent judgments stilled. We have been told that we have no right to regard those horrors as indicating greater sin on the part of those who suffered than the sin of those who escaped; but we have been told on the other hand that we all deserved to suffer calamity ten thousand times greater than these; we have had revealed to us the full dreadfulness of sin in the presence of the holiness of God's being. And we have been told of the act of God's grace by which at infinite cost to God Himself—we have a right to utter these stupendous words—mercy was extended to us who deserve it not. Great are the mysteries that are not revealed; they should ever make us humble. But greater also, and at least sufficient, are the mysteries that have been revealed. And these mysteries should make us more humble still.

When will men see that nothing but truth can satisfy the longing of the human soul? Religious conceptions which are merely useful and not eternally true are not useful at all. But, as it is, a deadly blight of pragmatism has fallen upon the world. The intellect is dethroned and intellectual decadence is rapidly setting in. Men are following the will-o'-the-wisp of a practical religion which shall somehow be independent of facts; they are trying to produce a decent, moral life in this world while denying the basis of morality in the being of God. They have embarked on a vain search for an authority which is merely man-made and can therefore never command the reverence of man. The words of Hosea are fulfilled in the modern conception of God, as in the idolatry of the eighth century before Christ. Of the useful, non-existent, practical God of modern times also it may be said: "The workman made it; therefore it is not God."

The world is restless today. There are many voices but there is no peace. Men are feverishly saying, to a god manufactured to serve the social needs of man: "Deliver me; for thou art my

god." They are trying to produce decency without principle; they are trying to keep back the raging sea of passion with the flimsy mud-embankments of self-interest; they are trying to do without the stern, solid masonry of the will of God. When will the vain effort cease? Shall we continue on our wanderings? Shall we continue to stagger like drunken men? Shall we still fashion a divinity that shall serve our utilitarian ends? Shall we amuse ourselves with idols? Or shall we return unto God?

### North Jersey Presbyterian Meets at Ringoes

**G**REAT enthusiasm and devotion to missionary responsibility marked the fall meeting of the North Jersey Presbyterian held on November 20th in the Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church of Ringoes, New Jersey. About eighty women were present from widely separated areas. Mrs. John F. Gray, wife of the pastor of the host church, presided as president *pro tempore*. Her opening speech struck the theme for the day's discussions: "Our Missionary Responsibility to Our Own Community." Miss Margaret E. Hunt of Philadelphia gave the morning address which was full of practical suggestions for persuading unchurched families to attend the church.

The offering of the day was set apart for the work of the Rev. Bruce F. Coie in Warren Point and, as a result, the piano used in the chapel is almost entirely paid for. The Rev. Wilson Albright conducted a forum on the subject of community mission work, and the discussion was ably handled by Mrs. H. C. Walwyn of Columbus, N. J., and Miss Susan Beers of the Morristown church. Musical selections were rendered by Mrs. Justus Bryan of White Horse and Mr. Coie and the Rev. James W. Price.

Mr. Price, newly-installed pastor of Immanuel Church, Morristown, gave the afternoon address. He stressed the importance of the Christian home. There, he asserted, was the most difficult place to live the Christian life but also the most effective means of spreading the gospel and building up the church.