

Isaiah 43:33

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Preacher: David Gibson

[0 : 00] We're going to look this morning at two false religions. Two false religions. Now it might help you, I think it will help you to have that Bible passage that Paul read open in front of you, page 604-605 in the church Bible, Isaiah chapter 43, verse 22.

What makes a false religion? What makes a religion fail? I guess if you were to ask people around you, people who you work with tomorrow morning, here is one standard answer to that question about what makes a religion false.

People will say a religion fails, or should fail, if that religion causes people harm or starts wars. Now I think we can agree with those answers, can't we? It's very strange indeed to find people who say that they are in touch with God and yet who want to harm and destroy and kill other people. What kind of God is that?

But in the Bible, it is something else that makes a religion false, that makes it fail, and it's this.

Religions fail when they do not reach God. Religions are false when they lead people away from God and not towards Him.

Back in the 19th century, John Godfrey Sachs wrote a poem called The Blind Man and the Elephant. And that poem has become a very famous way of talking about world religions.

[1 : 45] There were six blind men who one day all were in a room with an elephant, and all six blind men each touched one different part of the elephant.

One man touched the elephant. One man touched the leg and said, I think this is a tree in front of me. One touched the elephant's side and said, I think I'm touching a wall.

One touched the trunk and said, I'm holding a mighty serpent. Each blind man thought they had the truth about the elephant. And so the story goes, each world religion holds one small part of the truth.

No one religion has a total grasp of the truth. Hinduism over here has one conception of what God is like. Islam perceives God to be a bit like this.

You Christians, you say that God is a bit like that, and so on. And that's all fine. We are all blind, but touching somehow in some way the truth.

[2 : 52] Religions are different paths, all going up the same mountain, different ways of getting to the same point at the top. The Bible says, not all religions reach God.

Not all religion is true religion. So what's the difference? How would we know? How can we tell what is true religion? Can you spot it when it's laid out in front of you?

Can you tell the real thing from the fake? This morning, two tragedies unfold before our eyes. Two tragedies in the hearts of two very different kinds of worshippers.

And I want this morning simply to show you two tragedies in this passage. Here's the first one. Two points for you this morning. Number one, the tragic folly of man-made gods.

The tragic folly of man-made gods. I want to take the second half of the passage first of all.

Everything from chapter 44 verse 9 onwards is where I want to start.

[4 : 01] Here's the first kind of false religion. This is idolatry. Out and out paganism. And we need to be clear.

I mean, what did you think as Paul read it from verse 9 onwards? Well, folly is quite a weak word.

This is, the writer saying, the tragic stupidity of man-made gods.

Look how it begins in verse 9. All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. It's not just saying that what they make are nothing.

You see that? Look how strong it is. Those who make them. The makers, they themselves, are nothing. Those who make an idol to worship prove that they really have no sense of meaning or purpose in the world.

The things they delight in. One commentator says, these things are their little darlings. They're what they stroke with their hands.

[5 : 07] Or stroke in their hearts with their affections. And yet, you see what he says? They are profitless. Worthless. Isaiah says, now let's take time to look at this.

Let's put an idol. A statue. Let's put it in the middle of the room. Let's gather around and look at it. Now, can you see? Can you really see what it is you're looking at?

Look at verse 12. Here's where sarcasm begins, doesn't it? You see the blacksmith there in verse 12, covered in sweat and grime, bulging biceps, working away at his idol.

Look what he can make with his hammer and tongs. He's skillful. And yet, here's the thing. You notice he makes something with his diminishing human strength.

At the end of making his God, he's knackered. Needs a rest. You're telling me, Isaiah says, that the human being who has grown so tired, now in need of outside sustenance to sustain him, he's grown tired of making something that he's going to worship?

[6 : 22] Making your God, Isaiah says, can be exhausting work. Why don't you have a rest? Put your feet up. Have something to eat. Is your God going to be able to revive you and sustain you and feed you?

Well, actually, it turns out he can actually sort of feed you. You can, if you want, carefully plant a seed. Grow a tree.

Cut it down. You can burn half of it to keep you warm and cook your food on. And the other half, you can worship. Now, it's worth getting inside Isaiah's logic here.

It's so sensible, isn't it? Surely, look at verse 19. Surely, Isaiah is saying, surely anybody can see this. To give divine honors to something I have made.

That cannot be right. And for a human being to prostrate themselves in worship before something that they have created, well, Isaiah is saying that is cart before horse.

[7 : 29] It's back to front. Which came first, me or the wood that I'm working with? Which has more power, me or the wood? I got tired making this little thing in front of me.

What do I now expect it to do for me? Isaiah knows that the mere presence of worship, the fact of adoration, does not necessarily equal worship.

And we only need to use our brains to see this. The fact of religion, the fact of it in the world, is no guarantee of true religion.

Real religion. How different Isaiah is from the world in which we live. Isn't it true? No one wants to criticize. No one wants to be rude.

No one wants to put their hand up and say, I think the emperor has no clothes. The edifice is beautiful. The idol is stunning.

[8 : 34] The traditions are well established. The rituals are meaningful. The culture is precious. The beliefs are deep-seated. And Isaiah says it can be all of those things and be very, very wrong.

Now it's very important to see here that this is not just a taunt. This is not just sarcasm.

It's not just mockery. It's not none of those things for the sake of it. No, look at verse 17. The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it.

He prays to it and says, deliver me, for you are my god. Look at verse 20. He feeds on ashes a deluded heart that has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, is there not a lie in my right hand?

This is not just mockery. This is an analysis of false religion. Do you know what the analysis report says as the prophet sits around the fire with this man, watching him cooking and eating and worshipping, using one end of the tree for fuel and the other for worship?

[9 : 50] Do you know what Isaiah sees? We need to see this. Isaiah sees that human beings long for the divine, and we use man-made devices to make us feel secure.

Isn't that what verse 17 is saying? Deliver me. Save me. Rescue me. Help me. You are my god.

Let me ask you this morning, what makes you feel safe? Just over a week ago, my wife managed to lose, well, it actually wasn't my wife's fault in the end.

It turned out to be our two-year-old. We lost a set of house keys. Cars, doors, padlocks, all gone, in somebody else's hands as far as we knew.

We felt terribly, terribly insecure. I hope in our hearts, as we've been reading this, as Isaiah is mocking idolatry, I hope that we have not, in our minds, been tempted to mock any other particular religious group in the world without seeing that Isaiah is speaking even here to us.

[11 : 16] What makes you feel safe? Do you feel more safe and secure when the bank balance is flush with cash or when you're running low?

Do you feel more safe and secure when the government party you voted for comes to power? When your football team wins the league? When you have all your ducks in a row and health is good and children is fine?

Deep, deep, deep in the human heart is a longing for someone or something to save us. And so often it is what makes us feel safe and happy and secure that receives the quiet gratitude of our hearts. Now if you look at verses 12 and 13, now of course we would nominate different craftsmen today, wouldn't we?

I guess some of you may have called a carpenter recently, but probably not a blacksmith. Well they're not in the ascendancy like they used to be, but who do we lift the phone and call?

[12 : 26] Accountants, managers, builders, doctors, teachers. And what we say to them is, can you make me safe?

Our devotion to what is man-made knows no limits, knows no ends, and it is the story of the human heart in every age, in every generation.

And in it all, here is the tragedy, here is what is pathetic, verse 20, we are trying to save ourselves. One human being turning to another human being. Save me, help me. The tragic stupidity of man-made gods.

But I need to say this, this morning, that kind of false religion, that kind of false religion is not the worst kind there is.

[13 : 37] It's pretty incredible to say that, isn't it, given what we've just seen in those verses, but there is something worse. Here's the second thing I want us to see. Number two, the tragic folly of knowing the true God, but not knowing him.

The tragic folly of knowing the true God, and yet, not knowing him. Look back at chapter 43, verse 22.

Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob, but you have been weary of me, O Israel. You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honoured me with your sacrifices.

There's more than one way to worship. You can do it. You can do it in the forest, round the shrine, under the stars. You can do it in the temple, round an altar, in the church.

There is something worse, Isaiah is saying to us. There is something worse than a taunt of religious falsehood. There is heartbroken rebuke for religious facade.

[14 : 56] That is worse. If you look at verses 22 and 23, do you notice, again and again, God uses this phrase, you did not.

You have not. You have not done this, nor that. Actually, in the book of Isaiah, that is a very strange phrase to use, because Isaiah has kept saying, again and again, all the way through the book, starting from chapter 1, that people were doing nothing but bringing sacrifices to God.

Listen to chapter 1, verse 11. God says, the multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me? I have more than enough of all your burnt offerings.

How can he say here now, in verse 22, you did not bring me these things. Actually, this is a different way of making exactly the same point.

In an even stronger way, the problem wasn't that the people weren't bringing sacrifices to God. It was how they were doing it. The way in which they were doing it.

[16 : 04] That was the problem. Listen to Alec Mateer, a man who has devoted most of his life to studying the book of Isaiah. Put your eyes on verse 22.

And Alec Mateer says that the Hebrew in that verse is better translated like this. Not me did you call. In other words, you were calling someone down there.

I saw you. I heard you in the temple courtyard. But it's not me you were calling. Verse 23. Mateer says that the pronouns, me, me, are meant to be emphasized in that verse so that the meaning is this.

Burnt offerings you brought, but not to me. Oh, which is worse here in our passage this morning? Which is worse?

To never know the true God and worship an idol? Or to be brought to know the true God and yet lose your way to his house? And take your sacrifices and offerings and have God say, I don't know who you think those are for.

[17 : 21] There's an incredible play on words here. It's actually visible to all of us in our translation. Verse 23. God says, I have not burdened you with demands for loads of sacrifices.

That verb, to burden, it's the same word that's used in the book of Exodus where the Egyptians burdened the people by making them their slaves.

That's what the verb means, to make a slave of someone. I rescued you, God is saying, from one form of slavery not to lead you into another form of slavery.

I didn't make you slaves all over again. I didn't take the bricks off your back in Egypt only to put sacks of grain for sacrifices on your backs now instead.

I have never stood over you with a whip saying, give me, give me, give me. I have not been demanding of you.

[18 : 22] But look what you have done to me, verse 24. I have not burdened you, but you have burdened me. You've made a slave of me.

You see, here's what's happening. God gave his people the sacrificial system to liberate them, to set them free from their sins.

It was a sign of God's friendship and love and grace. I want to be close to you, God said, and near to you. And to come close to you, your sins need to be wiped out.

I can't come close to you. You can't come close to me. Unless you do this, burnt offerings and grain offerings. Do you know what the people did?

That gift of friendship they took and turned into a new form of slavery. Incessant religious ritual with no love for God at its heart.

[19 : 26] And God sees it and knows that they have lost the heart of it. He knows that they think that if they bring a sacrifice, it's like rubbing the lamp and out will pop the genie, God, their slave, their servant.

These people think religious ritual is a technique for manipulating divine blessing. Listen to Alec Mateer.

by making ritual into the exclusive content of their religion, they cut themselves off from the benefits the sacrifices were intended to bring.

Ritual divorced from spiritual commitment neither satisfies God nor blesses his people. I can see all your religious fervor says God.

The problem is I can see no religious reality. There is worship and services and meetings and programs and events.

[20 : 34] Your diary and calendar is full. But here's what I can also see. That your heart is empty.

Your heart is empty. I can see what you're saying but not me did you call. I can see what you're bringing but not to me.

These sacrifices were designed for relief and delight and joy and homecoming to God every single time. God's people turned it into drudgery and attendance and box ticking and rule keeping and keeping up appearances.

Look at verse 24. You have not brought me sweet cane with money expensive sweet cane or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices.

You have not given to me the very best that you have. The point of true religion is not that it satisfies people but that it satisfies God.

[21 : 51] You have not lavished on me your love God is saying in verse 24. Our worship is something we should lavish on God and you will know as well as I do that what we do not love and whom we do not love we do not lavish.

Only if we love do we lavish. Toll bridge on the M6 many of you I know have had the joy of travelling it.

You reach that point don't you? £3.50 the barrier is down. £3.50 please to be allowed to pass. What do you say when you get to that barrier?

£3.50 you must be kidding. I love that this road is here. Is that all you want? £3.50? I can't believe how good you've been to me.

Let me give you more. £35 I'll move the decimal point. No hang on I love this road so much £350 I'll pay you.

[22 : 58] You've been so good to me. Mr. Osborne is that all you want to take from my salary? Why not more?

I love that you do this to me. No those things are a tax aren't they? A burden a weight we pay it and we would take back every single penny if we could.

I can see several young men here this morning. Young men just try that same approach to your taxes when it comes to buying an engagement ring for the woman you love or an anniversary present.

What is the least I can get away with here? Keep that up and let us know how it's going in ten years time. No love real love knows nothing of taxes.

Real love is lavish. It's glad. It's joyful. It takes the very best that I have and says God this is for you. That is what pleases me says God.

[24 : 21] Is ritual the sum total of your religion this morning. Not all religions reach God.

And sometimes the very religion which God himself has created can end up falling the most short.

The worst kind of false religion is not the idolatry in the forest.

The worst kind of false religion is when God himself reaches down to us and we take what he gives and turn it into a way of rejecting him.

Not because we've turned our back on him but precisely because all we have turned towards him is simply our faces and nothing more. The tragic folly of knowing the true God and yet not knowing him.

So what do we do? What do we change? Well I want to finish with this. There are three commands here for us in this passage.

[25 : 31] You probably missed them in the size of the reading. Three things God tells us to do and they are all connected to him. Verse 26 of chapter 43.

Here's the first one. Remind him God. Put me in remembrance God says verse 26.

Let us argue together. Set forth your case that you may be proved right. You see what does it mean? How do we not fall into the trap of verse 23?

Empty religious ritual. How do we stop it happening? Because here you are in your church family again like you were last week. Like you'll be next week. Like you were last year.

Hopefully like you'll be next year. Here we are saying and doing the same things week in week out. You'll try and pray and read your Bible this week.

[26 : 30] Just like last week with all the same ups and downs and successes and failures of doing so. God So what does reality with God, an authentic relationship with God, what does it look like?

Well look at verse 26. God says it looks like this. Get last week's photo album out and let God see it. Not what you posted on Instagram but everything about you out into the open.

The things in your heart and your head that sum up what you are really like. The things you saw and said and did and thought that no one else knows that you saw or said or did or thought.

Put me in remembrance God says. Just remind me what's been going on with you? How did you get to this point? How did you get here?

What's happened? It's a lovely phrase isn't it? Put me in remembrance. God hasn't forgotten of course. It's a lovely gentle way of saying I don't need to be reminded about the past but you do.

[27 : 58] Because here's the thing here is the hinge of true religion. It is all about forgiveness of sin. That is the heart of true religion.

That is the whole point of what I gave you God says. The lambs, the grain, the incense, the punishment falling on someone else instead of you.

it's because my past, my guilt needs to be dealt with, needs to be forgiven.

Lose that sense of need and you will very soon lose your need of Jesus. It's why you confess sins, why we confess our sins together in our services week by week.

It is the essence of true religion. A review of the past which states things to God as they really are and comes to him with open hands to receive his grace.

[29 : 04] If you look at verse 26 again, let me put it like this. For real religion to be alive in your heart, come to church every single week to state the case for your innocence.

come to do that. Then let yourself be found guilty and then go home justified. That is real religion.

I'm here, Lord. Here's what's happened. I'm guilty and because of you I'm forgiven. Secondly, real religion also does this.

Look at verse 21 of chapter 44. It remembers. It remembers God. Look at that verse.

Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant. I formed you. You are my servant. O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.

[30 : 11] Short-term memory loss is the fast track to false religion. Forgetting who God is and what he's done. Lovely contrast here, isn't there, in that verse, verse 21.

We've just had the man making his idol, his fuel, his food, his worship. We've had a human making the thing that he worships. And how does God follow it?

Straight away in verse 21. Never forget, I made you. I made you, my child. But not just that.

Look at the contrast between the start and the end of the verse. Israel, my servant, my child, always remember that I never forget. Don't forget that I always remember.

You see the principle? Real religion is never about what we do for God, but what he does for us.

We don't make things for him.

[31 : 15] He made us for him. We don't make things to worship. He made us to worship him. Alec Matir, last time, he says this, there is a narrow dividing line between giving our all in devoted service to Jesus and finding our all in our devoted service to Jesus.

There is a narrow dividing line between giving our all in devoted service to Jesus and finding our all in our devoted service to him. Giving our all is good, but finding our all in giving is not good.

Then Alec Matir says this, it is why many ministers struggle to retire. They have lost that which they were devoted to. They become devoted to the ministry, not the master.

If you're like me, you will know this morning that you know what it is like to slowly drift from the depths of God's love and compassion and care and friendship for you.

Do you know what it's like to lose that? God's sense of delight in you as his child? It's so easy to do, isn't it? It happens slowly.

[32 : 46] God's grace in our hearts kind of leaks out and goes faint and runs low. So we all need to do the final thing.

Look at verse 22, chapter 44. I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.

Remind God, remember God, return to God. Confession of sin every week. Paul said this, didn't he?

It is never about entering a world of morbid introspection or self-hideal gloominess. How can it be when our God is like this in verse 22?

Clouds that roll through the sky, everything that's happened in your past, God says, I just roll it out of the way. That mist in the morning that's here when you first wake and then is gone in no time.

[33 : 51] You don't even notice it going. I treat your sins like that. here is a God who always, always leaves the light on.

A God who always puts water by the door for us to wash in. A God who always leaves food on the table, bread and wine.

A God who always, always points back to the cross of his son and says, I have redeemed you. Look what I've done, what I've given.

So won't you return and come back to me? Amen. Let's pray briefly together.