

# Gods That Fail

## ***“Liberation from the idol of control”***

Genesis 12-22

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on April 2, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please turn in your Bibles to Genesis 17. We come today to the end of our series on idolatry. I trust that we now see that idolatry is not an issue simply for ancient uncivilized tribes. As you read the Bible it becomes clear that idolatry is far deeper than bowing before a physical statue. This becomes clear in the letter we call I John.
  - For five chapters and 105 verses John talks about how to live in vital fellowship with Jesus, the Son of God. But have you ever seen how John ends his letter? When John wants to summarize all that he has said, what does he say? ***“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”***
    - What? John has not written one word about worshipping statues. What does keeping yourself from idols have to do with living in fellowship with Jesus? David Powlison gives the answer: **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** ***“John’s last line properly leaves us with that most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart. Has something or someone besides Jesus Christ taken title to your heart’s trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?”***<sup>1</sup>
- As we come to the end of our series I want to look at what I am going to call the idol of control. I want to trace this idol through the life of Abram in order that we might understand it in our lives and be free of it.

### IDENTIFYING THE IDOL OF CONTROL

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Let’s begin then by identifying the idol of control.
  - After Adam and Eve had plunged the world into the chaos of sin, God, out of sheer mercy and love, promised that he would rescue us. He came to Abram and promised that through his line the whole world would be blessed.
    - Now if God promises to bless the world through your family line what needs to happen in your life for that to be true? You need to get married and you need to have kids.
  - Abram was married but there was a problem. His wife Sarai was barren and as Hebrews 11 says ***“he was past age...and...as good as dead.”*** To complicate matters a full decade had passed after God’s promise. Not seeing any results, Abram tried to take control of the situation. He adopted Eliezer, his household servant, to be his heir. But that is not what God promised so God appeared again in chapter 15 and says, ***“This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”***
    - But again there was no child. Abram and Sarai became impatient and once again, try to seize control of their lives. Sarai tells Abram to take her servant Hagar as

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<sup>1</sup> David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair’*, 35. <http://www.ccef.org/idols-heart-and-vanity-fair>

another wife. He does this and has a son named Ishmael. Abram is publicly declaring Ishmael to be his heir.

- All this took place 11 years after God made his original promise. But again, this is not what God promised and so God appears again in chapter 17. So this is now 24 years after the original promise. Then look at verse 15. **(SHOW SLIDE 4) READ 15-18** - *And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”*

- So do you see what is happening here? Instead of trusting God, Abram is trying to seize absolute control of his life and destiny. We are the same as Abram.
  - Old Testament Scholar Tremper Longman, whom I am borrowing from today, says this: **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** *“We all tend to operate out of a faulty assumption that looks something like this: ‘If only I could control my world, life would be manageable and have meaning and purpose.’ Related to this faulty assumption is an equally faulty one: ‘I ought to be able to control my world.’”<sup>2</sup>*
    - We not only think that if we could control our lives they would be better, but we also believe that we should be able to control them.

## HOW CONTROL IS A GOOD THING

- This is a very subtle idol because the line between good control and idolatrous control is often so hard to see. Remember that we make idols when we take a good thing and we elevate it to the status of God in our lives. Control and power are inherently good things.
  - For instance, God calls us consider the future and to plan. We are to think about what consequences will arise from our choices and act rightly. We are to act in ways that ensure our lives are rightly ordered.
    - The book of Proverbs blasts the person who, out of laziness, does not work to control their future. Proverbs 6:6 says, **“Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!...it stores its provisions in summer <sup>[L]</sup>and gathers its food at harvest.”**
- We are called to work and bring order out of chaos because God is a God of order. We are called therefore use our power to control our lives so that the laundry gets done, the food gets prepared, the term papers get written, the work gets done and our relationships are on track.
  - The human desire to control our world, under the will of God, is inherently a good thing.

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<sup>2</sup> Dan B. Allender & Tremper Longman III, *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart*, 26.

## HOW CONTROL BECOME IDOLATROUS

- But what so often happens is that our need to control gets out of control. When this happens we all become what are known as ‘control freaks.’
  - So how can you tell when good control has become idolatrous control?
- You can see that control has become an idol when you find yourself in conflict with others. All conflict arises because of the idolatrous battle for control. In Greek mythology the three brothers Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades went to war and defeated the elder gods to gain control over the air, the sea, and the underworld.
  - So you can see control being the god when you find yourself at war with others because they are getting in the way of what you want.
- You can see that control has become an idol when you get upset because your carefully crafted schedule gets interrupted.
  - Years ago I was deeply confronted by this when I learned that almost every story we have of Jesus is the result of an interruption to his schedule. Jesus had a very distinct schedule and plan to get to Jerusalem yet he never viewed people as an interruption.
    - Take Luke 8 for instance. Jesus steps off a boat and a man who is possessed by a legion of demons interrupts his schedule. As soon as Jesus finishes freeing this man his schedule is again interrupted by a man named Jarius who wants him to come to his house because his 12-year-old daughter is dying. As Jesus is on his way to deal with this interruption a woman who was bleeding for 12 years interrupts Jesus from Jarius’ interruption.
    - How many ministry opportunities have we missed because we had a schedule that we felt we had to keep and would not let it go?
- You can see control becoming an idol in your life when you are constantly frustrated with how other people do things, when you micromanage, because ‘they just don’t get it.’
  - You can see control has become an idol when you are willing to lie or slander so that you maintain control of your image.
    - Finally, you can see control has become an idol by how you spend your money. Like the man who accused his wife of trying to control how others thought of her by spending a lot on her appearance until it was pointed out to him that he saved every penny and was selfish because he was trying so hard to control his need to feel secure.
  - Well that should get you started on seeing how much like Abram we seek to control our lives in idolatrous ways.

## EXPOSING THE IDOL OF CONTROL (REVISED)

- Having identified the idol let’s move to our second heading: **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** exposing the idol of control.
  - Let’s look at the results of Abram’s idolatrous control. Turn back with me to Genesis 16. **(SHOW SLIDE 7) READ 4-6 - *And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had***

*conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!” But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.*

▪ The idol of control is exposed in two ways in Abram and Sarai’s life.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** First, rather than making our lives better, idolatrous control makes us into people who are difficult to live with.
  - What was the result of Abram and Sarai’s idolatrous control? Sarai and Hagar were at each other’s throats. The need for control created further need for control and the two women and their gods went to war with each other.
    - When you realize that Hagar’s son, Ishmael, became the father of the modern Arab nations and Sarah’s son, Isaac, the father of the modern Jewish nation you get a clear picture of the chaos that resulted from Abram’s attempts to control his life.
      - Control makes you controlling, which results in conflict.
- In C.S. Lewis’ famous book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* there is a boy named Eustace. He is a boy who is always grasping at power and control. He asserts this control by teasing other children, torturing animals, and driving adults crazy.
  - One night he finds a giant pile of dragon treasure in a cave. He is so excited because he can imagine how much power and control he would have with such wealth. When he wakes up though, to his horror, he sees that he has become a dragon. Lewis writes, **“Sleeping on the dragon’s hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself.”**<sup>3</sup>
    - Do you see the principle: you become like what you worship. When we set our hearts on control we becoming controlling. Controlling people always end up in conflict with others.
- There is a second way to expose the idol of control. I put it like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** While we can achieve a certain level of control in our lives, complete control is a futile endeavor. Abram simply could not control when his wife would get pregnant. In fact, his efforts to try and control this only caused his life to spin out of control.
  - Tremper Longman writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** **“Such events remind us we can’t really control our lives. But that doesn’t keep us from exerting enormous energy to maintain the illusion of having life in order...While we can achieve a significant level of control, keeping all the plates spinning is no more possible than grasping the wind...”**<sup>4</sup>**[This] touches the raw nerve of reality: The world is rigged for frustration. There is a right way to do things, but we will never know for sure what it is. There is a way to make life work, but we will never do it right. No matter how we try, we will never be in control of our world.”**<sup>5</sup>
- Romans 8 tells us why this is the case. **“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.”**

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 97.

<sup>4</sup> Dan B. Allender & Tremper Longman III, *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 33.

- God set up his original creation in such a way that the very fabric of the universe worked in favour of human endeavors. But when humanity rebelled against God, God ripped the very fabric of his own universe so that nothing would work as it was originally intended to. Work became difficult. Childbirth became painful.
  - God did this so that we would understand that we are not gods, and when we try to act like it in controlling everything, the very fabric of reality fights back against us. Life simply does not work the way it is supposed to.

## MY ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL ALWAYS FAIL

- I was keenly reminded of this some time ago. I planned to take two days, fly to Calgary, and go skiing with my brother-in-law. As I settled into my seat on the airplane I enjoyed the idea that in just one hour I would touchdown in Calgary. That would give me some time with his family and a good night's sleep before a big ski day. Twenty minutes passed and the plane just sat there. Then 30 minutes, then 45 minutes. After an hour of we finally taxied onto the runway.
  - ***“One hour late. That’s not too bad,”*** I thought to myself. Sitting at the end of the runway the captain came on the intercom and said, ***“Folks, Calgary airport is fogged in. We are just going to taxi here for a bit and wait for it to clear.”*** Fifteen minutes passed. Thirty minutes passed. Forty-five minutes passed and the captain came on again. ***“Calgary airport is down to one runway and all air traffic is being re-routed to Kelowna. We are going to go back to the terminal and de-board the plane. We’ll wait a while and let you know when we can leave.”***
    - So we de-boarded the plane. Another 45 minutes passed by sitting in the terminal. Finally they came on the speaker and said, ***“The Calgary airport is now shut down. All flights have been cancelled. Please see the service desk about re-scheduling.”*** At that moment two or three flights of people created the longest line you have ever seen waiting to rebook their flights. My easy one-hour flight ended up wasting more than half a day and cost me \$25 for a cab ride late at night.
- Events like that happen all the time in life. You get stuck in rush hour traffic. Your kid throws a tantrum in the middle of a store. You get sick and can't work. Every day events like this all demonstrate one big fact: we are not gods.

## DEFEATING THE IDOL OF CONTROL

- Let's turn to our third heading now: **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** defeating the idol of control.
  - We have seen Abram struggle to trust God with his life. We have seen him try to seize control of his life and the failure that it led to. But something happened to Abram over the years. We don't know what it was. I am sure that the miraculous birth of Isaac was a major part of it.
    - By Genesis 22 it becomes clear. Turn there with me.
- This is the famous story where God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. For a man who so desperately tried to control his destiny, this command demanded that he relinquish all control. In verse 1 we learn that it was a test. **READ 1 - *After these things God tested Abraham.*** God never intended the boy to die but to see where Abraham's

heart was. What I want you to see is how Abraham, the man who was ruled by idolatrous control, responds. **READ 2-3** - *He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.*

- Do you see it? He does not ask questions. He does not grasp hold of his son. He obeys immediately. He gets up early. And Abraham has clearly surrendered control of his life to God because we read that he was fully prepared to sacrifice Isaac. **READ 6, 9-13** - *And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. . . . When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.*
  - What is clear is that somewhere along the line Abraham stopped trying to keep control of his life and surrendered it to God.
- To quote Longman one more time: *“It’s the paradox of the gospel: Strength is found in weakness. Control is found in dependency. Power is found in surrender.”*<sup>6</sup>
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** We defeat the idol of control when we allow the difficulties of life to humble us into a life of continual surrender to God.

## **EUSTACE AND THE GOD WHO IS WORTHY TO BE TRUSTED**

- This is what happened to Eustace. He was humbled and wanted to be a boy again. One night he met the great lion named Aslan. Aslan challenged him to undress – that is to try and take off his dragon scales. He managed to peel off one layer but found that he was still a dragon underneath. He tried again and again but could not remove his dragon scales. The lion finally said,
  - *“You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt... Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt – and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-*

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<sup>6</sup> Dan B. Allender & Tremper Longman III, *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart*, 38.

*looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been...I'd turned into a boy again.*"<sup>7</sup>

- Aslan represents Christ. This is a vivid picture of what God does to us. If you allow the difficult experiences of life to humble you instead of embitter you, and if you turn to God you will find that he liberates you from dehumanizing effects of control.
- But you will never surrender yourself to God (especially when life falls apart), unless you believe He can be trusted with full control of your life.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** The only way we will surrender is when, through the gospel, we see that God can be trusted with control of our lives. In the gospel we learn that he is utterly worthy to be trusted.
- For in the gospel we learn about another Son who, like Isaac, would climb a hill because His Father told him to. Like Isaac, this Son also would struggle up that hill because of the wood he was carrying on his back. Like Isaac, this Son would trust his Father, surrendering control of his whole life to Him. When they laid Jesus down on the wood he, like Isaac, did not struggle or run away but trusted His Father completely.
  - However, when God raised the knife of justice over His Son there was no voice from heaven commanding him to stop. When the nails pierced his wrists there were no words that said, *"do not lay a hand on the boy."*
    - God did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all.
- Do you want to know if you can trust God with control of your life from its biggest issues and questions to its smallest details? Then look to the cross. For there you learn that the God who is calling you to surrender full control of your life to Him is for you.
  - Out of love he has not punished you for acting like god and controlling your own life. Out of love he provided a substitute who was brutally slain so that you might not ever have to lay down on the alter.

## CONCLUSION

- Some of you have not yet surrendered your life to Jesus. What holds you back? Have you not learned from the frustrations of life that you are not in control? How long will you wait before surrendering your life to Jesus? Has he not proved in sacrificing his life for sinners that He is for us not against us, that He can be trusted? This day I plead with you to bow the knee, to surrender control, that you might find the freedom that God desires for you.
  - Others of you are Christians but life has spun out of control. This is a unique moment for you. You may have lost control but what you can control is how you respond to God. God intends the difficulties of the moment to compel you to seek Him and to trust Him.

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<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 115-116.