

Bible Studies for Life Series for November 19: Live in reality, not delusion

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Live in reality, not delusion

- Isaiah 40:18-22; 41:5-7; 44:9,18-20; 45:20-22

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The lesson title bids us to “Live in Reality, Not Delusion;” a worthy goal in a world where post-modern thought suggests there are many competing realities, and where our own experience suggests at the very least there are people out there who disagree with our conclusions—sometimes violently.

What is real? What is true? What can we count on? These and many other questions hover near the surface of our thinking, and in times of crisis they may burst forth from our lips. We may begin to feel that we live in a world where nothing is sure and everything is relative.



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Again, the words of the prophet Isaiah remind us there really is nothing new under the sun. In all places and in all times, God's people have faced the challenge of living in a world of competing realities. Isaiah reminds us that God's people know reality through their experience of the living God.

Scholars recognize the significant change of style, tone, emphasis and theme that begins with Isaiah 40 and come to different conclusions regarding its date, place of origin and author. This section of Isaiah (40-66), represents the time of the exile, the Persian conquest of Babylon and the return from exile.

For this reason, some scholars suggest another prophet or prophets, perhaps disciples of Isaiah (Second Isaiah, Third Isaiah), recorded a further word from God for a subsequent generation. Others suggest that Isaiah looks ahead to a time beyond his lifetime and reflects upon the difficulties his people will face in the Babylonian exile.

Gary Smith suggests in his book *The Prophets as Preachers: An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets* that in these chapters, "the setting of Isaiah's audience is problematic because there are few historical details." Smith points to the clear references to the Persian king Cyrus the Great in Isaiah 44-45 that would suggest a post-exilic date but cautions the absence of lamentation over the fall of Jerusalem argues against post-exilic date.

Scholarly debates and conclusions aside, the later chapters of Isaiah clearly represent a further word from God to a people who are about to suffer or

who have suffered a tremendous challenge to their understanding or reality.

Because of Judah's lack of obedience to God, destruction results. What seemed true—Judah's inviolability—becomes false—Judah falls at the hands of Babylon. All the evidence seems to suggest Judah's God pales in comparison with Babylon's gods. This new "reality" competes with the old reality and—worse yet—seems to be winning! Isaiah steps into the breach to set things right—the "new reality" does not compete with the true reality; in fact, it is not a reality at all.

Smith suggests, "Isaiah legitimated a new social understanding of reality by transforming the people's perception of who God was and what his plan was for dealing with their problems."

At the heart of the focal passages lies Isaiah's concern that Judah be delivered from false gods. Idolatry stands as the "alternative reality" that tempts God's people. In the ancient world, the worship of other gods was self-evident.

Modern churchgoers may imagine that idolatry presents no challenge to our reality. This is a dangerous and foolhardy assumption. Isaiah invites God's people to reflect on what God is like and to compare realities (40:18-23). Isaiah suggests the rich person will select an idol of gold and the poor person an idol of wood, but both attempts to approximate God pale in comparison to God who "sits enthroned above the circle of the earth. ... [And] stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in" v. 22). Idols attempt to define, limit and control God—attempts that Isaiah finds empty, futile and self-deceptive.

Isaiah understands the reason people reach out for the "sure reality" of an idol (41:5-7). Fear causes people to place their trust in things seen rather than things unseen. On the human scale, the gods of Babylon seemed to

provide a more certain reality.

In times of crisis, God's people still may be tempted to look at the world around them and place their trust in the "certainties" of material success, political power, social prominence, educational achievement, or even religious claims and personalities. However, when our devotion to anything—a person, an idea, a belief, a thing—becomes elevated above our devotion to the living God, we commit the sin of idolatry.

An episode from Mark 10 illustrates the danger of misplaced devotion. Because of their erroneous conclusion that Jesus has no time for children, Jesus' disciples defend him from an onslaught of children and parents. Jesus' all-knowing stare and indignation exposes their misplaced devotion to the "idea" of Jesus rather than to Jesus himself. The disciples were protecting Jesus from something he did not need protection from. They were holding back Jesus for themselves. They were making Jesus over into their image, rather than allowing Jesus to make them over into his image. They were in essence committing the sin of idolatry.

Twenty-first century Christians, no less than Jesus' twelve disciples, must avoid the trap of creating idols that look just like us. There is perhaps no greater sin in the American church today, than when we take the biblical risen Christ and make him over into a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant politician, who holds our views about taxes, welfare, warfare and a host of other social issues. Isaiah calls us to reconsider God and the reality that God presents. God's people should not put their trust in gods that cannot save. Rather, Isaiah reminds us that "there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and savior; there is none but me" (45:21).

Discussion questions

- Are there truly competing realities in the world? Where are they most

evident? How do Christians engage in dialogue with these other realities?

- What kind of “idols” do Christians allow in their lives? How do we know when something becomes deserving of the title “idol”?

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