

# Theology for Life

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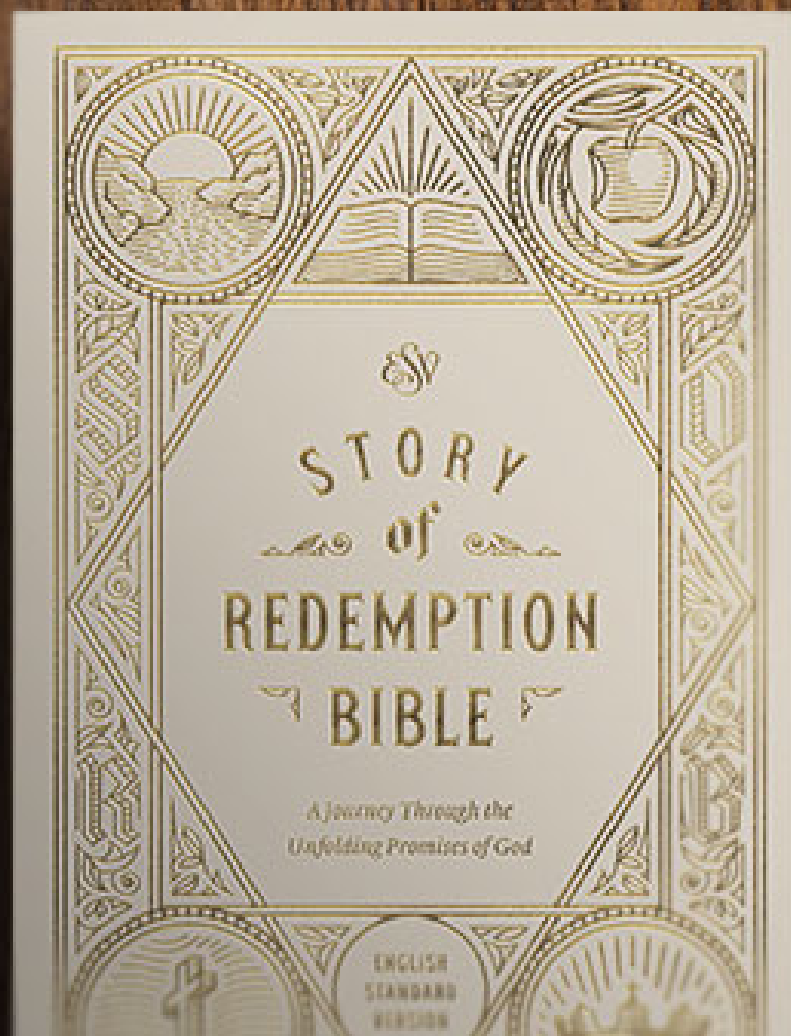


## **Inside this Issue...**

- **Idolatry and Sexual Sin**
- **Advice for Singles Who Feel Lonely**
- **Prosperity or Idolatry?**
- **How to Embrace Your Emotions without Being Ruled by Them**

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## Editor's Corner

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Idolatry is serious business in the eyes of the Lord, who demands absolute allegiance from the people of God. After all, there is no other true God, so it is foolish to trust in deities (gods) who cannot save (Isaiah 43:11; 44:6). To refuse to worship the Lord God is idolatry—a grave sin, condemned throughout the Bible (Leviticus 19:1-4; Psalm 31:6; 96:5; Ezekiel 6; 1 Corinthians 10:1-22; Revelation 21:8).

Throughout biblical history, the idolatry that most of the Prophets spoke against was the serving of pagan deities—beings that people worshipped specifically as gods. Those who worshipped pagan gods built graven images of these false gods and constructed altars at high places—sites where they were worshipped (2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 17:1-23; Isaiah 44:9-20). In this sense, idolatry today exists within Hinduism, tribal religions, and where professing Christian churches gloss over people's animalistic and polytheistic traditions.

The Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 95 defines idolatry as *"having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed Himself in the Word."* Idolatry can also be seen in the major monotheistic religions such as Islam, whose practitioners worship the Allah of the Qur'an; and modern Jews, who worship a unitary deity, defined more by rabbinic tradition than by the Old Testament. Both of these religions are guilty of idolatry because they do not worship the triune God of Scripture.

Idolatrous attitudes and practices do not need to be religious, in the sense of being directed toward a defined 'god', or need to occur within an organized religious setting. Anything that we love *more* than the Lord Himself is an idol. Jesus makes this particular point in Matthew 10:37-39, when He rejects any who love their family members more than Him. In Philippians 3:19, Paul identifies some individuals in that congregation whose god was "their belly"; meaning that their physical appetites were so consuming that Paul viewed them as worshipping their stomachs.

Every fallen culture has idols, so Christians must be sensitive to what the world is calling us to worship in place of the one true God. Neither sex, nor power, nor fame, nor anything else

deserves the place of supremacy in our lives. Only the transcendent, which is identified as the Lord and Creator of all, is deserving of our ultimate worship.

In John 5:20, the apostle says, “the Son of God has come,” which refers to the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus. In the Incarnation, the divine Son has come into the world in human flesh. Only those with faith and assurance in the Lord Jesus can embrace the Incarnation without reservation.

John also explains (in 1<sup>st</sup> John 5:20) that the Lord has “given us understanding.” John’s phrasing is interesting, since the idea of salvation by right knowledge was essential to those countering the apostle’s teaching. Knowledge of biblical Christianity is critical, for we cannot know God without a revelation from the Son (Matthew 11:27); therefore, knowledge is vital for salvation. Unlike the false teaching of John’s opponents, knowledge leading to salvation is knowledge of the Incarnate Christ—a person. Such knowledge involves not only belief in facts, but also personal trust in Him as Savior and Lord.

John’s point now becomes clear—knowing “him who is true”, God the Father is inseparable from being in union with God the Son, Jesus Christ (1<sup>st</sup> John 5:20). To know the biblical God and have eternal life is to be *in* the Son—Jesus. Only those who belong to Jesus, who are His disciples, have everlasting salvation.

The Lord demands our allegiance, but He also expects His people to keep themselves from idols (1<sup>st</sup> John 5:21). Since there is only one God, Christians must never set up anything else in His place (Exodus 20:3). Though it may not be the gods of wood or stone common in the Old Testament, Christians must be careful not to make their jobs, money, families, reputations, or anything else the center of their affections. John Calvin is right when he says, “the vivifying light of the Gospel ought to scatter and dissipate, not only darkness but also all mists, from the minds of the godly.”

Idolatry is not a subject that is often covered, but it is one that gets to the root of the fallenness of man and our need for Christ alone. Our idols reveal our need for Jesus. Our lives are always before the face of the only true God, who sees and knows our thoughts and deeds. Idolatry helps reveal the heart of man and what we value of supreme worth. The Gospel provides the cure to the idolatry of man—showing where we find our true identity and value apart from Christ alone—and how we can, as the people of God, rest in who we are now in Him. The gospel highlights our need to expose our idols, and the Holy Spirit does this, through the teaching of the Word of God to convict, comfort, and equip the His people.

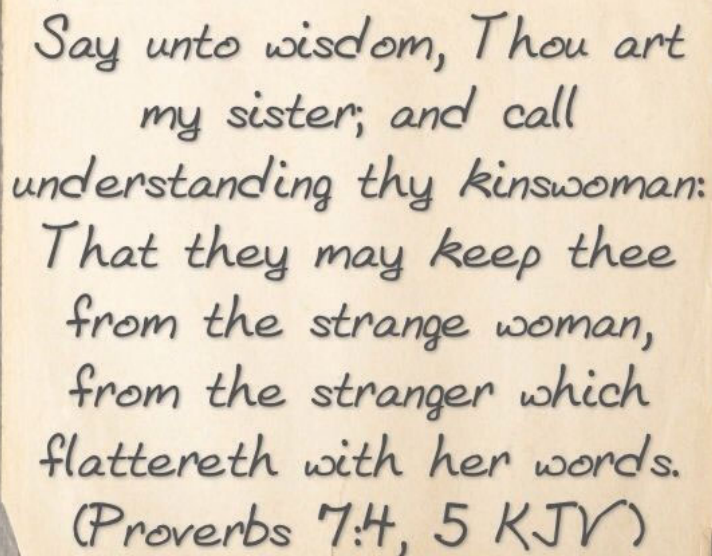
In this issue, you’ll find a variety of articles aimed at those who are single, married, and everywhere in-between. As you consider this topic of idolatry, our hope and prayer is that you’ll be helped, equipped, and pointed to the Lord Jesus.

In Christ alone,

Dave Jenkins  
Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

## Idolatry and Sexual Sin

By Dave Jenkins



Say unto wisdom, Thou art  
my sister; and call  
understanding thy kinswoman:  
That they may keep thee  
from the strange woman,  
from the stranger which  
flattereth with her words.  
(Proverbs 7:4, 5 KJV)

**Life in this fallen world means that we will face sinful temptations of various kinds, and the Bible notes that one of the most powerful of these is the temptation to sexual immorality.**

David's life is an implicit warning to us in this regard. If he, one of the godliest people in ancient Israel, could commit adultery (2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 11–12), then surely we should not

think that such a sin would be impossible for us to commit. When it comes to the power of this temptation, however, the book of Proverbs stands out in its depiction of how powerfully enticing sexual sin can be. The prologue of Proverbs (chapters 1–9) repeatedly warns against the power and destructive nature of the adulteress.



Proverbs 7 is one of the most explicit warnings from this prologue concerning adultery. Yet, before mentioning the adulteress specifically, the opening verses of this passage exhort the reader to search after wisdom as an intimate friend and bind the commandments on the fingers and heart (Proverbs 7:1-4).

We see here a call to take the lessons of Proverbs and internalize them, to memorize these wise sayings. Knowing and believing these teachings, we read, is the way we will be kept “from the adulteress with her smooth words” (Proverbs 7:5). Sin is seductive and deceptive, especially sexual sin, and the only way to

stand fast against it is to know the truths of divine wisdom before we enter into the arena of temptation. Given the teaching of the rest of Scripture, we can broaden the instruction in Proverbs 7:1-5 to cover all of God’s Word and all sin. That is, the critical way to be prepared to resist temptation is to know and trust in the Word of God.

“If even the Savior resisted temptation by knowing the Word of God, how much more do we need this knowledge?”

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 calls us to put the law of God on our hearts and to have it on our minds and in our speech at all times. When Jesus resisted the temptations of Satan, He did so by His knowledge of biblical content and its true meaning (Matthew 4:1-11). If even the Savior resisted temptation by knowing the Word of God, how much more do we need this knowledge?

The remainder of Proverbs 7 focuses on the smooth speech of the adulteress and the promises that she cannot fulfill (Proverbs 7:5-20). Of particular note here is her reference to having made sacrifices and paid her vows (Proverbs 7:14-15), a reference to the idolatry of the nations that incorporated cult prostitution into the worship of their gods. By yielding to the adulteress, the young man would be joining with a cult prostitute in idolatrous worship.

The temptation of sexual sin does not, in our day, always present itself as a temptation to idolatry. However, the Bible's teaching on sexual sin makes it clear that sexual immorality is not only a sin against the body, but it is also a sin against the Lord. To lie with one who is not one's lawful spouse is to forsake our union with Christ and be joined to another (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:15-20). We flee sexual sin not only to protect our families, but also to protect our very souls.

### **What To Do With Sexual Sin**

The first thing to do to flee sexual sin is to *turn to the Scriptures*. Next, turn to John Owen (never a bad idea!), or some other counselor—dead or alive. But remember that we have not been left only to good human resources in this area. We need to be taught from “the mouth of God”, so that the principles we are learning to apply carry with them both the *authority* of God and the *promise* of God to make them work.

Several passages come to mind for study: Romans 8:13; Romans 13:8-14; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:14-7:1; Ephesians 4:17-5:21; Colossians 3:1-17; 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:1-11; and 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:28-3:11. Significantly, only two of these passages in Romans contain the verb “*mortify*” (put to death). Of equal significance, the context of each of these passages is broader than the single exhortation to put sin to death. As we shall see, this is an observation that turns out to be of considerable importance.

“Paul gives us the pattern and rhythm we need.”

Of these passages, Colossians 3:1-17 is the best place for us to begin. Here we see relatively new Christians, who have had a wonderful experience of conversion to Christ from paganism. They had entered a gloriously new, and liberating, world of grace. Perhaps, if we may read between the lines, we can ascertain that these new Christians had felt for a while as if they had been delivered, not only from

sin's penalty, but almost from its influence — so marvelous was their new freedom. But then, of course, sin reared its ugly head again. Having experienced the “already” of grace, they were now discovering the painful “not yet” of ongoing sanctification. Sounds familiar, wouldn't you say? But as in our evangelical sub-culture of quick fixes for long-term problems, unless the Colossians had a firm grasp of gospel principles, they were now at risk!

For just at this point, young Christians can be relatively easy prey to false teachers with new promises of a higher spiritual life. That was what Paul feared (Colossians 2:8, 16). Holiness-producing methods were now in vogue (Colossians 2:21-22). The Christians at Colosse seemed to be deeply spiritual, just the thing for earnest young believers. But, in fact, “*they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh*” (Colossians 2:23). Not new methods, but only an understanding of how the Gospel works, can provide an adequate foundation and pattern for dealing with sin, which is the theme of Colossians 3:1-17.

Paul gives us the pattern and rhythm we need. Like Olympic long jumpers, we will not succeed unless we go back from the *point of action* to a point from which we can *gain energy* for the strenuous effort of dealing with sin. How, then, does Paul teach us to do this?

First of all, Paul underlines how important it is for us to be familiar with our new identity in Christ (Colossians 3:1-4). How often, when we fail spiritually, we lament that we forgot who we really are — Christ's bride. We have a new identity. We are no longer “in Adam”, but “in Christ”; no longer in the flesh, but the Spirit; no longer dominated by the old creation, but living in the new (Romans 5:12-21; 8:9; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17). Paul takes time to expound this at length in Colossians 3. Consider the following:

- **We have died with Christ (Colossians 3:3)**
- **We have even been buried with Christ (Colossians 2:12)**

- **We have been raised with Him (Colossians 3:1)**
- **Our life is hidden with Him (Colossians 3:3)**
- **So united to Christ are we, that Christ will not appear in glory without us (Colossians 3:4).**

Failure to deal with the presence of sin can often be traced back to spiritual amnesia—forgetfulness of our new, true, real identity. As a believer, I am someone who has been delivered from the dominion of sin; therefore free and motivated to fight against the remnants of sin’s sickness in my heart.

### **Principles to Fight Sexual Sin**

The first principle is simply this: *Know, rest in, think through, and act upon your new identity — you are in Christ.*

Second, Paul goes on to expose the workings of sin in every area of our lives (Colossians 3:5-11). *If we are to deal with sin biblically, we must*

“Mortifying sin is a whole-of-life change.”

*not make the mistake of thinking that we can limit our attack to only one area of failure in our lives. All sin must be dealt with.* Thus, Paul ranges through the manifestation of sin in private life (Colossians 3:5), everyday public life (Colossians 3:8), and church life (“one another”, “here”—that is, in the church fellowship; see Colossians 3:9–11). The

challenge in mortification (putting sin to death) is akin to the challenge in dieting (itself a form of mortification): once we begin, we discover that there are all kinds of reasons we are overweight. We are really dealing with ourselves, not merely with calorie control. I am the problem, not the potato chips! Mortifying sin is a whole-of-life change.



Third, Paul's exposition provides us with practical guidance for mortifying sin. Sometimes it seems as if Paul gives exhortations ("Put to death"; Colossians 3:5) without giving "practical" help to answer our "how to" questions. Often today, Christians go to Paul to tell them what to do and then to the local Christian bookstore to discover how to do it! Why this bifurcation? Probably because we do not linger long enough over what Paul is saying. We do not sink our thinking deeply into the Scriptures. For, characteristically, whenever Paul issues an exhortation, he surrounds it with hints as to how we are to put it into practice. This is certainly true here. Notice how this passage helps to answer our "how to" questions.

### **1. Learn to admit sin for what it really is.**

Call a spade a spade — call it "sexual immorality", not "I'm being tempted a little"; call it "impurity", not "I'm struggling with my thought life"; call it "evil desire, which is idolatry", not "I think I need to order my priorities a bit better." This pattern runs right through this whole section of Colossians. How powerfully this unmasks self-deceit and helps us to unmask sin lurking in the hidden corners of our hearts!

### **2. See sin for what your sin really is in God's presence.**

"On account of these the wrath of God is coming" (Colossians 3:6). The masters of the spiritual life spoke of dragging our lusts (kicking and screaming, though they be) to the cross, to a wrath-bearing Christ. My sin leads to — not lasting pleasure — but holy divine *displeasure*. See the true nature of your sin in the light of its punishment. Too easily do we think that sin is less serious in Christians than it is in non-believers ("It's forgiven, isn't it?"). Not if we continue in it (1<sup>st</sup> John 3:9)! Take a heaven's-eye-view of sin and feel the shame of that in which you once walked (Colossians 3:7; Romans 6:21).

### **3. Recognize the inconsistency of your sin.**

You put off the "old man", and have put on the "new

man” (Colossians 3:9–10). You are no longer the “old man”. The identity you had “in Adam” is gone. The old man was “crucified with him [Christ] in order that the body of sin [life in the body dominated by sin] might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6). New men and women live new lives. Anything less than this is a contradiction of who I am “in Christ”.

#### **4. Put sin to death (Colossians 3:5).**

It is as “simple” as that. Refuse it, starve it, and reject it. You cannot “mortify” sin without the pain of the kill. There is no other way!

But notice that Paul sets this in a very important, broader context. The *negative* task of putting sin to death will not be accomplished in isolation from the *positive* call of the Gospel to “put on” the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14). Paul spells this out in Colossians 3:12–17. Sweeping the house clean simply leaves us open to a further invasion of sin. But when we understand the “glorious exchange” principle of the gospel of grace, then we will begin to make some real advance in holiness.

As sinful desires and habits are not only *rejected*, but *exchanged* for Christ-like graces (Colossians 3:12) and actions (Colossians 3:13)—as we are clothed in Christ’s character and His graces are held together by love (Colossians 3:14), not only in our private life, but also in the church fel-

lowship (Colossians 3:12–16)—Christ’s name and glory are manifested and exalted in and among us (Colossians 3:17).

“The maturing Christian doesn’t point the finger at others...”

You might have a friend talk with you about their struggle with sexual immorality or another sin issue in their lives. When they ask, “How you are?” be honest, but also be open with them when

they talk about their sin issues. As Christians, we are to “one another” each other in our local churches. What I’ve talked about in this article is

meant not for you to point the finger at someone else and say, “Why (or how) are you doing at that?” (what was mentioned in the article). The maturing Christian doesn’t point the finger at others, but pleads guilty, then runs in confession and repentance to the Lord (1<sup>st</sup> John 1:9).

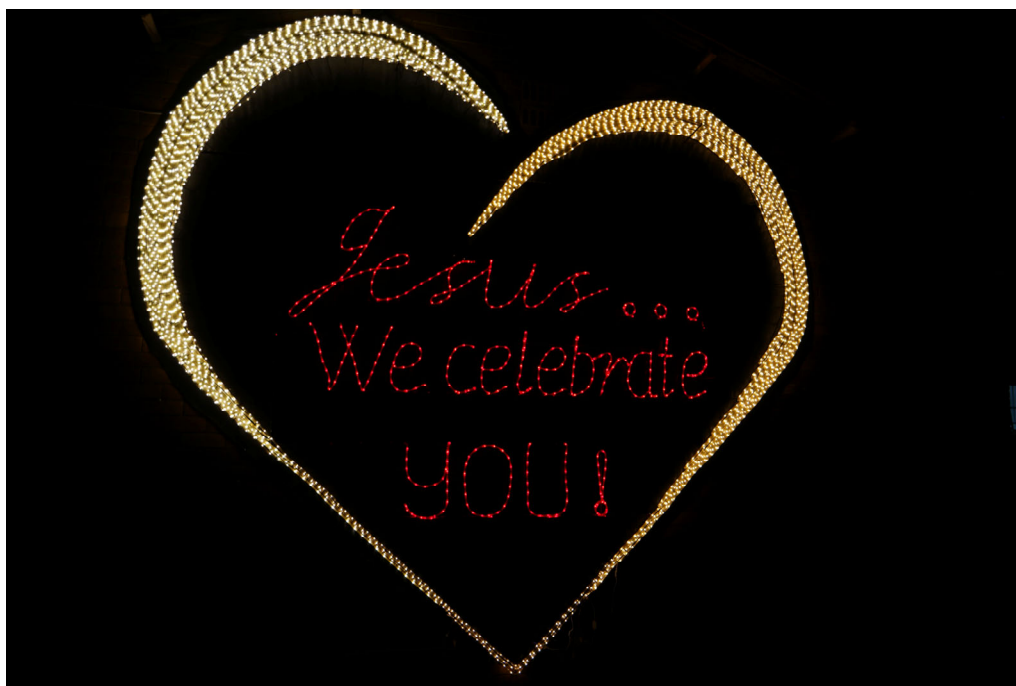
**My earnest prayer is that we will be quick to keep short accounts before the Lord and to run to the righteousness of Jesus Christ.**

## Idolatry and Getting a Right Understanding of God's Love

By Dave Jenkins

### In Exodus 3:14, God says, "I am who I am."

Such a declaration is powerful because the Lord God was declaring not only who He is at His absolute essence, but also declaring to the world, "I am the *only* God!"



As we fast forward to the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ declares seven times, "I Am!" in the Gospel of John. In Leviticus 11:44-46, we are taught that God is holy, meaning He is set apart. In 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:13-15, we are taught that as a result of God's holiness, He requires Christians to live holy lives. Gaining a right understanding of the love of



God requires a biblical understanding of His holiness. The matter of understanding the holiness and love of God is so serious because, if we get His holiness wrong, we diminish and undermine His character. If we get the love of God wrong, then we have a God who will crush humanity in judgment, not love us through Christ alone.

### **The Love of God and the Christian Faith**

In the book of 1<sup>st</sup> John, the Apostle John roots the assurance of the Christian using the interplay between external evidence and the internal testimony of grace. To abide in Christ is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit at work in the Christian. The Holy Spirit provides assurance that the people of God belong to Jesus, but never operates apart from outward evidence of faith. The presence of the Holy Spirit is discerned both by His internal testimony and by obedience to the commands of Jesus given through His apostles (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:6).

Some of the other commands of John include belief in the Son Jesus (1<sup>st</sup> John 3:23; 4:1-5) and love for one another as Christians (1<sup>st</sup> John 3:23). Love, to John, is a critical mark of the Christian who has genuine faith. Those who have not been born of God do not know God, nor can they know that “God is love” (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:8). Love is essential to the nature of God. Those who have become partakers of the new nature (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1:4) are the people of God. They alone increasingly reflect the holy and loving character of God and love others. The transformed hearts of Christians respond to the call of God to love one another.

John is addressing those in 1<sup>st</sup> John who thought love made God too personal. Many today follow along with John’s original audience believing “God is love”, but do not believe what the Bible teaches about the rest of God’s character. Such people often recoil at the idea that the way to heaven is narrow (Matthew 7:13-14) and restricted by Christ only through Him (John 14:6; Acts 4:14).

When Christians speak of the love of God, we are not minimizing the other characteristics of God. For example, the simplicity of God tells us the love of God never operates apart from the holiness, mercy, omnipo-

tence, justice, or other divine attributes. It is loving, therefore, to seek justice and demand holiness, but never to do so at the expense of mercy. Christians need the help of God and the wisdom He provides to apply His love into every phase of our lives.

### **The Love of God and His Discipline**

Within God's perfect love is the reality that God chastens those whom He loves. Hebrews 12:5-7 reminds us, *"You have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?"*

Christians should both expect and embrace the discipline God gives them. The divine discipline of God is intended to help the people of God grow in a relationship with our heavenly Father.

Revelation 3:19 states, *"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent."*

"Times of doubt may come, and the storms of life may assail us, but if we belong to Christ, we are held by Him and will belong to Him always."

Throughout the book of Proverbs, Solomon speaks about a father disciplining and correcting their children out of love. To the biblical writers, rejecting correction from the Lord God is to walk in the way of foolishness and wickedness. To walk in the light according to the biblical writers, is to accept correction, repent, and become wise. Such Christians understand that the loving embrace of God involves the guiding rod and staff wielded by the Chief Shepherd, Jesus.

### **The Love of God and the Jealous God**

In Exodus 34:14, we find the command, *"Worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."* John Frame in *Systematic Theology* explains, "God's jealousy is not inconsistent with his

love or goodness. On the contrary, his jealousy is part of his love.”

### **The Love of God and the Christian's Security**

In Romans 8:31-39, Paul writes about the love of God and how down to the nanosecond the Christian is held secure in His sovereign hands. Only those who are truly Christ's will be held until the end, for they have true faith in Him. Times of doubt may come, and the storms of life may assail us, but if we belong to Christ, we are held by Him and will belong to Him always. Such biblical truth should cause Christians to draw near humbly to the throne of God to know and grow in the love of God.

## Resisting the Power of Idolatry

By Philip Graham Ryken



**One of the things that has really helped me understand the power of idolatry in our own time and place is, strange to say, the plagues in the book of Exodus.**

One of the things that was amazing for me to discover is that all of the plagues in Exodus relate to gods that the Egyptians worshiped.

Just to give one example: the first plague was blood in the Nile River. The Nile was *everything* to the Egyptians. It was the source of their economy—it was like what Wall Street is for America's economy. One of the things that God was showing—and Exodus is explicit about this in a few places—was His glory over the Egyptians



and their gods.

In the story of Exodus you see God not just gaining a victory over people like Pharaoh, who had set himself over and against God and God's authority, but actually over *all* the things the Egyptians worshiped.

It's a little scary to think about, but I think that's a lesson for our own time and place. All of the things that we worship—power, money, sex, whatever idolatries we have in our own time and place—*all* of those idols are going to be defeated.

**Ultimately, all of those idols are going to let us down, they are going to disappoint us, and they are only going to be a source of frustration.** This is actually *good* news, because God doesn't want us to worship those things; He wants us to worship Him alone.

## The Vicious Cycle of Idolatry and Loneliness

By Lydia Brownback



**Our conscience is the first tip-off.** Do we have freedom in our conscience to indulge in whatever we're doing? Do we have regret after indulging in it? Most people can sense when they've crossed a line.

Sometimes we blur those lines due to repetitive use of something as an escape—we can grow callous to what we're doing. And what started as a coping mechanism becomes so much a part of life that it works itself into our identity. Then we don't even see anymore that it is an escape, and we're trapped.

God is so kind, however—He doesn't leave us trapped. He'll send the Holy Spirit to nudge our conscience. He'll let consequences come as a result of illicit escapes. Everybody has those, whether other people know about them or not. Everybody's got some way of coping with their bad feelings—television, internet, food, drugs, drinking, sex—and then we try to manage and minimize these coping mechanisms so they don't take over our lives. We use them to ease us through a difficult hour or two, but it doesn't work for very long, and it definitely doesn't *solve* anything. It may make us feel better for a little while, but it's no solution.

**We will only find a solution if we** (1) acknowledge that we're escaping, and (2) are willing to look away from those means of escape to examine ourselves and ask, "What is it I'm running from and what am I afraid of?" Then you take it to the Lord (and perhaps to another person) and listen to His response.

## Advice for Singles Who Feel Lonely

By Lydia Brownback



**We're not to be pitied.** If we feel sorry for ourselves, others will feel sorry for us. If we recognize that we have a unique opportunity—the advantages of being able to serve the church, and if we're filled with gratitude for this opportunity and season—then others will em-



brace that too.

What's important is *our* outlook and *our* attitude—we can approach singleness positively if we recognize that our marital status is in *God's hands*. He will change it when and if He chooses. We don't have to worry about the statistics, we don't have to worry about biological clocks—none of those things determine our life. It is God alone who determines these things. **We are free to step out in our single state today, because it is completely in the Lord's hands.**

## Prosperity or Idolatry?

By Voddie Baucham



### Is God opposed to prosperity?

Where is the line between being grateful for the gifts He's given us and idolatry? Sometimes God offers prosperity as a blessing for faithfulness (remember Solomon?), and often it comes as a result of hard, honest work. It is certainly not

wrong to provide nice things for your family, and laziness is far from condoned in Scripture.

Our pursuit of prosperity can turn into idolatry if we are not careful. It's easy to keep our eyes a little too focused on the prize; putting the gift above the Giver. On the other hand, if we shun prosperity for fear of idolatry, we run the risk of being ungrateful. How do we find the balance between prosperity and idolatry?

First of all, it is important to be a good steward of your gifts. Every believer is gifted in special ways, and we need to discover our gifts and use them for God's glory. This may seem simple, but there is a deeper

truth here. If we do our job because God gifted us in that area, we're being stewards. If we do our job because there is money to be had, we're on our way to idolatry. If one goes into medicine because he has been blessed with a scientific mind and a desire to heal the sick, wonderful. If he goes into medicine because it is the most lucrative profession he can think of, that is a different issue.

We must also prosper as God allows. Be the best you can be at whatever profession God has called you to, be it law or farming. We must also prosper in ways that are pleasing to God. Work hard, don't cheat your boss. On a different note, we might get a job offer that sparkles with a dazzling salary and benefits package, but is in a field that may tempt us to compromise or does not honor God. It would be better to take a more modest job in a God-pleasing environment.

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"Your bank account is **not** an adequate substitute for your presence."

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In the busyness of making a living and working hard, many people sacrifice their families. Some fathers are on the road 180 days a year, "bringing home the bacon". **Neglecting your spouse and missing your kids' childhood is simply not worth the extra salary.** Your bank account is **not** an adequate substitute for your presence. Ultimately, when you look back, you will not regret spending more time with family instead of chasing the last dollar.

## The Idolatry of Spiritual Laziness

By Jared C. Wilson

### Let's talk about laziness. Laziness is idolatry.

It is closely related to its opposite—workaholism. Both the sins of laziness and workaholism are sins of self-worship. The behavior looks different, but the root idolatry is the same. And the problem we face is that the law cannot do for either of these sins what grace does. There is no saving power in law. Further—and this is the crucial point in this particular discussion—there is no sustainable keeping of the law apart from the compulsion of grace. We can (and should) command repentance from sin, but it is grace that enables repentance and belief that accompanies it. Repentance problems are always belief problems. When we are set free from the law's curse, we are set free to the law's bless-



ings. The difference-maker is the gospel and the joyful worship it creates. Any other attempt at law-abiding is just behavior management.

So we cannot cure spiritual laziness by pouring law on it. God turns dry bones into living, breathing, worshiping, working bodies by pouring gospel proclamation into them. When we truly behold the gospel, we can't help but grow in Christ and with the fruit of the Spirit. Paul captures the essence of this truth in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:15-18:

*Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

The law cannot lift the veil. It cannot supply what it demands. But when, by the power of the Spirit, we turn to behold the Lord—not just see Him, but behold Him—the veil is lifted and we are transformed bit by bit, so long as we are beholding. This is not self-generated. It comes, Paul says, “from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Vicky Beeching’s song “Captivated” captures this truth well with these lyrics:

***Beholding is becoming, so as You fill my view  
Transform me into the likeness of You.***

According to 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:15-18, beholding is becoming. See how Psalm 119:18 relates “beholding as becoming” to obedience: “*Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.*”

What must happen for a lazy person to be able to become diligent? He must behold the wondrous things in God’s law. Does he just decide to do that? No. Okay, well, yes...sort of. But he must be moved to decide to be diligent from a force outside of himself. His eyes must be opened by the Spirit. And in this opening, the law and his keeping of it become wondrous, not tedious. This is really what we’re aiming for with gospel centrality, and it’s what gospel wakefulness [super]naturally produces:

obedience to God as worshipful response, not meritorious leverage. We are fixing our eyes on the finished work of Christ, so that we may be free, and therefore free to delight in the law, not buckle under it.

Religious people can't delight in the law like the psalmists do. They have to be set free—and feel free—from its curse first. This is where accusing gospel centrality of facilitating antinomianism becomes nonsensical. Generally speaking, people aren't lazy because they think they're forgiven for trespassing the law; they're lazy because they think the law doesn't apply to them. The truth is that we worship our way into sin, and we have to worship our way out. When people are lazy (or restless), they do have a sin problem, but the sin problem is just a symptom of the deeper worship problem. Their affections are set somewhere else. And wherever our affections are set is where our behavior will go.

**So gospel wakefulness does not mean or produce laziness.** But what gospel wakefulness does to the work of obedience is something we cannot muster up of our own power. It is the difference between driving our car and pushing it. Or, better, it is the difference between seeing the Christian life as a rowboat and seeing it as a sailboat.



## Does God Ever Give Christians Over to Their Idols?

By G.K. Beale



**The notion of the retributive irony has to do with being punished by means of your own sin.** Can believers suffer this kind of retributive irony? I want to address two things in this

article. First of all, let's focus a little bit more on another example of being punished by means of our own sin—the notion of idol worship.

Psalm 115 (and its parallel in Psalm 135) says, *"The idols of the nations are silver and gold. They have eyes, but they can't see; they have ears, but they can't hear; they have mouths, but they cannot speak. Those who make them will become like them, even those who worship them."*

The idea in these verses is that the nations are building these idols that look like people or animals. They have eyes, but they can't see; ears, but they can't hear. This concept is true spiritually, not just

physically. Despite popular belief in the ancient world—that is, the idea that if you worship idols it will bring you blessing—the truth is that it will only bring you death. Behind the idols, it's not just nothing, it's spiritual death and demons!

"Stop the idolatry and trust in me," the Lord says.

Deuteronomy 29:4 says, *"So you will begin to have eyes but not seeing and ears but not hearing."* In this passage, Moses is referring to spiritual eyes that aren't seeing and spiritual ears that aren't hearing. That's what the Prophet Isaiah also refers to in Isaiah 6:9-10, which says, *"This people, they have eyes but they can't see and ears but they can't hear."*

Generation after generation, Israel has been recalcitrant and they have not repented to the prophetic warnings (of Isaiah and others before him). "Stop the idolatry and trust in me," the Lord says.

And since they refuse to listen, God says, "You love your idols? I'm going to hand you over to them. You're going to have eyes but can't see, and ears but can't hear. Not in the sense that you're going to become petrified stone like the idols, but you're going to become as spiritually lifeless and inanimate as the idols. You like them? Okay, you're going to become just like them."

When we're committed to something else that doesn't have the Spirit of God, we become as spiritually inanimate as that thing to

which we are committed. The other question I want to pose is, “*Can believers be affected by this?*” I wouldn’t say that Christians are ever under the *judgment* of God after they believe, because Christ has taken that judgment. But there are disciplinary measures that God puts us through when we begin to wander from the path to which we’ve been called. We can be idol worshippers, and we can sustain damage as a result—all of us. In fact, I would say a principle of sanctification is that we won’t be fully sanctified until we die, or see the Lord when He comes back.

The principle of sanctification is that all of us, to one degree or another, are idol worshippers. Calvin said the heart is an idol factory—and that’s true to one degree or another. There are subtle ways that we can worship and be committed to other things instead of the Lord. And when we’re committed to something else that doesn’t have the Spirit of God, we become as spiritually inanimate as that thing to which we are committed.

**Maybe it’s a girlfriend, maybe it’s a boyfriend, maybe it’s a job, money, a hobby, or sports.** Whatever you’re committed to, if you’re committed to that *more than the Lord*, then you’re going to become (at least to some degree, depending on the degree of your commitment) spiritually lifeless and inanimate. The Lord needs to break through if you’re a believer. How does the Lord do that? Through His Word. It’s a living Word, and it can break through to us by the Holy Spirit, and shock us back into the reality of our relationship with the Lord—as His sons and daughters.



## Idolatry: The Desire to be Lord of What One Worships

By J.I. Packer



**The consistent biblical testimony is that idolatry is inexcusable.** Scripture never condones idolatry on the grounds that men knew no better, but condemns it on the assumption that they did, and that irrespective of whether they had encountered any part of God's special revelation or not (Isaiah 44:10-20; Habakkuk 2:18-20).

Quite so, says Paul; for it is out of *general*, not *special*, revelation that idolatry has been manufactured. Idolatry is a lie grafted on to some of the intuitions of general revelation in order to smother the rest; it was invented to provide sinners with gods they can worship while remaining their own masters. One

of the contradictions of fallen human nature is the desire to be lord of what one worships.

As a creature, man yearns for a god to serve; as a sinner, he is resolved to play God himself, and demands that everything else should serve him. This explains the absurd actions of the pagan who directs acts of worship to the image he made himself (Isaiah 44:10-20), while at the same time developing techniques of sacrifice, prayer, and sympathetic magic for getting his imaginary god to do what he wants (cf. 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 17:25-28; 36, 37; Matthew 6:7).

“All that happens is that they change their gods.”

And Scripture recognizes more forms of idolatry than polytheism. It says that idolatry exists whenever man gives himself up, heart and soul, to mastering an adored object. Covetousness is thus idolatry (Colossians 3:5). So it by no means follows that sinners forsake idolatry when they abandon polytheism.

All that happens is that they change their gods. Some ‘idolize’ wealth; and Christ calls such the slaves of Mammon in just the same exclusive sense as the Christian is the servant of his God (Matthew 6:19, 24). Others ‘idolize’ and live for ideas, ideals, a cause, power, a wife, children, country, beauty, and many other things besides.

The self-contradictory lust of sinful man to have something he can worship and master at the same time takes countless forms, each exhibiting the same pathetic ambivalence.

Trying to rule what one serves—being enslaved by what one tries to rule—trying to play God to one’s gods, and ending up the captive of them all—that is idolatry, in all its forms. **It is a satanic parody of man’s original relation to his Maker, and a source of endless misery to all its practioners.**

## The Remedy for Our Idolatry

By Nick Batzig



**“Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1<sup>st</sup> John 5:21).** If the heart of man is, as John Calvin described it, “an idol-making factory”, then the way in which those idols are destroyed should be of utmost importance to us. The Bible is replete with references to idolatry because it was written with the purpose of confronting it and providing the remedy for it. The idolatry of Israel is evident



throughout the Old Testament—no less than the idolatry of the Gentile nations. No sooner did God deliver His people from the bondage of the idolatrous Egyptians, than they made an idol at the foot of the mountain to which He had brought them to worship. The New Testament writers also bear witness to the pervasive sin of idolatry. In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul taught that men, by nature, *“exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the*

“Like the scapegoat being sent into the wilderness, this act prefigured God’s promise to put the sins of His people away from His presence.”

*creature rather than the Creator.”* He reminded the church in Thessalonica that they had *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven”*, and he exhorted the Colossians to put off *“covetousness, which is idolatry”*. In similar fashion, the Apostle John closed his first epistle with the admonition: *“Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”*

Throughout Israel’s history, a recurring act symbolized the means by which God would remove the idolatry of His people. When Moses found the people worshiping the golden calf at the foot of the mountain, he *“took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder.”* He then *“scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it”* (Exodus 32:20). When Moses recounted the act, he explained that he threw the dust of the idol *“into a nearby brook”* (Deuteronomy 9:21). The burning, crushing, and grinding of the idol represented the judgment of God against sin. The act of throwing the dust of the idol into the brook almost certainly represented the removal of it from the people, as well as from the presence of God. Like the scapegoat being sent into the wilderness, this act prefigured God’s promise to put the sins of His people away from His presence.

Moses’ symbolic act became a paradigm for the subsequent acts of the righteous kings of Israel. Each of these kings removed idols from the

land in a manner similar to that of Moses. King Asa cut down the idol that his grandmother set up and burned it by the Kidron (1<sup>st</sup> Kings 15:11-13). King Josiah *“brought out the wooden image from the house of the Lord, to the brook Kidron outside Jerusalem, burned it at the brook Kidron and ground it to ashes.”* He *“broke them down and pulverized them, and threw their dust into the brook Kidron”* (2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 23:6, 12).

Under the reign of King Hezekiah, *“the priests went into the inner part of the house of the Lord to cleanse it, and brought out all the debris that they found in the temple of the Lord...and carried it to the brook Kidron...and they took away all the incense altars and cast them into the brook Kidron”* (2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 29:16; 30:14). While these kings are remembered for destroying idols from the land of Israel, none of them could purge the hearts of the people. The righteous kings of Israel may have temporarily purged the land of idols, but King Jesus removes them from our hearts forever. As He made His way to Calvary, Jesus crossed over the brook Kidron (John 18:1) to symbolize everything He had come to do. He was burnt, crushed, and ground by the wrath of God on the cross.

Jesus is the cure for our idolatry. God the Son took to Himself flesh and blood, so that He might bear the penalty for our idolatry in His own body on the tree. Then He rose bodily from the dead. The Father now commands us to worship a Man—the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

France’s foremost preacher of the nineteenth century, Adolphe Monod, explained the mystery of this truth in a most profound way:

***“I strive to live in the communion of Jesus Christ—praying to Him, waiting for Him, speaking to Him, hearing Him, and, in a word, constantly bearing witness to Him day and night; all which would be idolatry if He were not God, and God in the highest sense of the word, the***

***highest that the human mind is capable of giving to that sublime name.”***

What idols are you harboring in your heart? Are you giving affections and labors to created things? How are we to keep ourselves from idols? The remedy is only to be found in the person and finished work of Christ. He has destroyed the idols of His people, once and for all, by His death on the cross. Our sins have been washed away in His blood. He has “*cast them into the depths of the sea*”, even as the righteous kings cast the crushed idols into the brook Kidron. Praise God for His righteous King and His righteous rule in our hearts!

## How to Embrace Your Emotions without Being Ruled by Them

By Winston Smith

**Growing up on a large lake, I developed a great appreciation for the power of the wind.** I enjoyed many summer days sailing with friends on the family sailboat. When the weather was fair and there was a steady wind, it made for a delightful day. The wind carried you wherever you liked and you could just enjoy the ride. But on some hot summer afternoons a thunderstorm could blow up quickly. If you were too far out on the lake, it meant real trouble. Chaotic winds would stir up the waves, swing the boom wildly, and even threaten to capsize the boat.



Emotions can seem as unpredictable as the wind—sometimes gentle and comforting, sometimes stormy and threatening, and apparently beyond your control. But we don't have to live at the mercy of our emotions. Understanding why God gave them to us, and how they work, can help us engage them without being ruled by them. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

### **1. Accept your emotions as a gift from God.**

First, accept your emotions as part of your makeup as an image bearer of God. One of the things that Scripture teaches us about our emotions is how deeply they are rooted in what we value. When we encounter things we consider “good”, we experience emotions that *feel good*. For example, the blessings of life engender in us feelings like happiness, joy, and contentment. When we encounter things that we consider “bad”, we experience emotions that feel bad—like sadness, grief, and anger. Jesus himself exemplified this. When He encountered the hard hearts and oppression, He became angry (Mark 3:5). When He encountered death and loss, He grieved (John 11:35). When He faced torture and death, He agonized (Luke 22:44).

In a sense then, the more our hearts and values are aligned with God's, the more we will experience emotions that reflect God's perspective on what's happening in and around us. The more we mature into the image of Christ, the more our encounters with the truly good will engender positive emotions. Likewise, our encounters with the truly bad will engender even more negative emotions.

This is important to understand because Christians sometimes have the faulty view that the more we know, trust, and love God, the less we experience negative emotions. While it is true that our faith can keep us from being ruled by our emotions, it doesn't mean that we don't feel negative things or live in a fixed state of emotional bliss. Christians who don't understand this sometimes suffer anxiety, frustration, and shame about their emotions. Denying or hiding from negative emotions only complicates matters. When you don't have the words to describe how

you feel, turn to the Bible to find them.

## **2. Learn the language of emotions and name them.**

Second, it's important to develop emotional language and name your emotions. Have you ever noticed how sometimes you feel a little better after sharing frustrations or fears with a trusted friend? The actual circumstances that are bothering you may not have changed a bit. Your friend may not have done anything other than listen carefully and share their care and concern, and yet, your struggle is not as much of a burden as it was just a few minutes earlier. There are probably lots of reasons for that, but at a fundamental level, being able to name your emotions and experiences enabled you to entrust them to another who bore the burden with you. In other words, being able to name your emotions helped you to connect with another and be loved.

This can be very hard to do. Our emotions, especially the more painful ones, are often messy and complicated. We aren't necessarily sure exactly *what* we are feeling, just that it feels awful. The Bible provides some help. It is full of songs, poems, and narratives that describe the full range of human experience in all of its complicated messiness. Take the Psalms for example. There you will find thankfulness and joy, "*The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation*" (Psalm 118:14); frustration and anger, "*Be not silent, O God of my praise! For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues*" (Psalm 109:1-2); even utter despair, "*You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness*" (Psalm 88:18).

When you don't have the words to describe how you feel, turn to the Bible to find them. Allow words inspired by the Holy Spirit to become your words. As you do, you are beginning the process of entrusting them



to another. First and foremost, you are beginning to entrust them to God by mouthing His words after Him, but learning the vocabulary of emotions can begin to help you share them wisely with trusted others as well.

### **3. Discern how emotions invite you to grow in love.**

As God's image bearers we were created to mature into Christ's likeness, which is love itself (1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1-16), and our emotions can actually help us to grow in love. This can happen in many ways. For example, as we are more honest and engaged with our emotions we may notice a "gap" between how the Bible suggests we should feel and how we *actually* feel. For example, Paul writes that, as an expression of genuine love, Christians should, "*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*" (Romans 12:15). In other words, love requires us to enter into the emotional experience of those we love. When you experience a "gap", say you are untouched by the other's suffering or you experience their happiness as jealousy, then you know that your emotions are not being shaped by love, but something else.

Or perhaps you wrestle with particularly strong negative emotions. For example, say you have an *anxiety problem*. At times you seem to worry about everything. Or perhaps your fear is paralyzing and prevents you from living a full life. There are all kinds of techniques that you can learn to help you engage your fear and perhaps become desensitized to it, and that's fine. But realize that your fear may also suggest a need to receive more deeply God's care and love for you. The Bible records many examples of His people's fear, to which He often reminds them that though they may suffer, He is with them and cares for them. Consider Isaiah 43:2, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*" Again, knowing God's love doesn't totally remove negative emotions, but it can keep them from controlling you and keep you grounded and able to

learn and grow.

Navigating our emotions can be tricky, but it's easier if you continually review a few basics: First, remember—your emotions are part of how God made you to reflect His image and His values. You and emotions go together just like sailboats and wind are meant to go together. You don't want your boat to be sunk by the wind, but without the wind you aren't going anywhere.

Second, learn the language of emotions. You might say that learning the vocabulary of emotions is like learning how to sail with a crew. To sail safely you need to be able to say, "Watch out for the boom!" or "We're taking on water! Grab a bucket!" And it makes sailing much nicer when you can say, "Isn't this a lovely day. I'm glad we're here together."

Finally, knowing that emotions are meant to help us to grow in loving and knowing God's love is like having a compass heading. **Even when the winds make sailing hard, if you know where you are trying to go, you'll know how to navigate them to get there.**

## Recommended Reading on Idolatry and the Christian Life

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering the subject of idolatry and how it impacts the life and ministry of the Christian. We understand we haven't covered everything on this topic, still, it is our prayer that readers of this issue of *Theology for Life* will grow in their understanding of idolatry so they can grow in the Word of God, in and through the grace of God.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list below. These books are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

- *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*  
By G.K. Beale
- *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes* By Nancy Pearcey

I hope you find these as helpful in your walk with the Lord as I have.

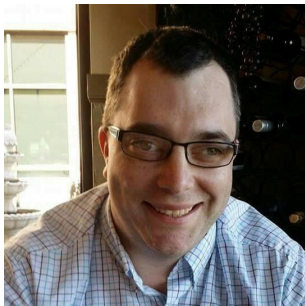
In Christ Alone,  
Dave Jenkins  
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