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Sermon Notes

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“Gods” You Must Carry vs. a God Who Carries You

Isaiah 46:1-13

One of the most popular and famous Christian poems of all time: “Footprints in the Sand”

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only.

This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord,

“You promised me Lord,
that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?”

The Lord replied, “The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.”

I have seen this poem depicted on numerous posters and framed prints and other forms of evangelical art. There is one hanging over a bed in Rand Cottage where my family was just last week.

It’s appeal is obvious: the idea that the Lord Jesus will CARRY US through all the bitterest trials of our lives

Obviously... the poem may tend to underestimate how much the Lord does for us in all the other times... honestly,

Acts 17:28 in him we live and move and have our being.

Colossians 1:17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

It's not as though we can walk on the sands of time in our ordinary days and not need Christ...

Actually, the hymnwriter put it perfectly:

"I need thee EVERY HOUR, most gracious Lord...!"

The basic idea behind this appealing poem, however, is absolutely true biblically... and it is the centerpiece of our meditation on Isaiah 46 this morning:

Our God is a God who CARRIES US...

but the idols of the nations are burdens that they must carry

Main Idea: The "gods" of Babylon will be exposed like all idols—crushing burdens that sinners carry, to their own destruction. By contrast, the living God is he who carries his children from their birth to their old age, even to their glorious salvation.

In this chapter, God continues his assault on the foolish wickedness of idols. He directly contrasts "gods" that you have to carry with the true God, who carries his people. This chapter depicts motionless gods made from silver and gold to a powerful God who plans all of human history and then orchestrates his plan to the minutest detail. The direct application to Israel, and indeed to all who trust in the Lord, is to understand how idols will always be a burden that lead to destruction, and how the true Lord is a living God, who daily carries his people through every experience of their lives.

In Isaiah 46, the Lord grants to his messenger, Isaiah, the prophetic eye to see the history of the Babylonian Empire through to its demise before the first of its days had begun. During that era of history, people believed there was a strong connection between the gods of a nation and that nation's military success. If one nation conquered another, their "gods" (idols) were carried off in triumphant procession by the conquerors, a clear indication of the futility of those gods. We certainly see this idea in the taunt of Isaiah 36:18-20, where the Field Commander of the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, boasted that none of the gods of any nation their armies had conquered had ever been able to deliver their lands from the

hand of the Assyrians. In Isaiah 46, God ridicules the idols of Bel and Nebo long before the military conquests of the Babylonians vaulted Bel and Nebo to the head of the pantheon in the estimation of the people of the ancient Near East. Bel (similar to the Canaanite "Baal") was the chief god of the Babylonians, often called "Marduk" as well. Nebo was Bel's son, and together, Bel and Nebo were the principal deities in the Babylonian religion. (We see them reflected in the names Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Belteshazzar in the Book of Daniel.)

Since we have been studying Isaiah 40-49, we have been forced to stare at ourselves in the mirror of God's perfect word again and again, and to see the idolatry in our lives... idolatry every bit as foolish and offensive to God as Bel and Nebo were in their day...

It is a CRUSHING BURDEN to our souls to live for any created thing – for money or power or sex or praise from people or material possessions or vacations or hobbies or food or drink or drugs or anything that takes God's place

Our idols are CRUSHING US every bit as much as Babylon's idols were crushing them

Christ alone frees us from the burden:

Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus has come to TAKE OUR BURDENS AWAY, not to add to them...

Isaiah 53:4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

So, what HEAVY IDOLS did you lug in here today? Are you ready to cast them off and embrace a God who is able to CARRY YOU?

I. The "gods" of Babylon a Crushing Burden, Crushed in the End (vs. 1-2)

Isaiah 46:1-2 Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary. They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden, they themselves go off into captivity.

A. Bel and Nebo Crushing Burdens

1. The actual idols are depicted as crushing burdens for their weary worshippers
2. Perhaps Isaiah saw a PROCESSION in his mind's eye... priests of Bel and Nebo carrying the heavy idols to put them on ox-carts to be pulled by beasts of burden
3. The idols are heavy because they are covered with PRECIOUS METALS... silver and gold
4. They are called "burdensome" and "a burden for the weary"
5. The weight of these idols is wearying to the beasts of burden... but perhaps the PEOPLE THEMSELVES are the beasts of burden... dragging the idols of Bel and Nebo around from place to place is WEARYING WORK
6. Amazing that the gods NEED TO BE CARRIED! The true and living God is OMNIPRESENT... the symbols of his MOBILITY are in various prophetic visions... like Ezekiel's vision of "wheels within wheels" or Daniel's vision of a throne with wheels

B. Bel and Nebo Unable to Save

1. The gods of Babylon could not save their people from the destruction that God had ordained through Cyrus the Great and the Medo-Persian army
2. They are idols that cannot save their people!! So...

C. Bel and Nebo Go Into Captivity

1. Vs. 2: Whatever remnant is left of the Babylonians will carry whatever idols of Bel and Nebo there are left after the conquest into captivity
2. Bel and Nebo could not save their people at all
3. Like all idols, in the end, they fail their worshippers

II. The Incomparable God Carries His People from Birth to Old Age (vs. 3-5)

Isaiah 46:3-5 "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, an have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you. "To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?"

A. A Call to the Remnant of Israel

1. The Prophet Isaiah was looking into the future, to the remnant of Jews that would be exiled into Babylon
2. The Jews were sent into exile by the punishment of God because they had worshipped idols and violated God's Covenant; so He punished them by slaughtering most of them, but protecting a small remnant
3. The Jews were not all wiped out by the Babylonian conquest of the Promised land... Jeremiah tells us 4600 of them were taken to Babylon. What a TINY NUMBER!!
4. Isaiah speaks across a century of time to that remnant that would be living in Babylon when Cyrus the Great came to destroy Babylon and let the Jews return to the Promised Land
5. He says He is the God who
 - a. Upheld them since they were conceived
 - b. Who carried them since their birth
 - c. And who promises to continue to do this for them even to their old age and gray hairs!!

B. God Has Carries Israel from Birth to Old Age

1. It was God who conceived the Jewish nation as a whole, calling something out of nothing... a barren couple (Abraham and Sarah) were blessed with a miracle baby, Isaac... and it was God who allowed the Jews to be fruitful and multiply in Egypt and become as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore
2. It was God who carried Israel out of slavery in Egypt like a father carries his son:

Deuteronomy 1:31 There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place

3. So Bel and Nebo are lifeless blocks of stone and wood and metal which are a BURDEN for those who try to carry them from place to place
4. The LIVING GOD is the one who has carried Israel as a nation, and EACH INDIVIDUAL JEW as a person from his/her birth until their dying day
5. It was no accident that the Jewish nation did not become extinct during the Babylonian Captivity... God sustained them as a nation

C. God Will Rescue Israel

1. This same God is the one who will save Israel from exile and restore her to the Promised Land
2. God would rescue Israel from the nations...
3. But far more importantly, through Jesus Christ, God rescues any of His chosen people from their sins

D. Who Then Is Like God? Certainly No Idol!

1. To whom will you compare this living God? There is NO ONE LIKE HIM
2. The idols of the nations are burdens to all who worship them!
3. These are the idols that led Israel into captivity to begin with

III. The Idols Cannot Move, Neither Can They Save (vs. 6-7)

Isaiah 46:6-7 Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles.

A. Hiring a Goldsmith to Make a God

1. Isaiah has already ridiculed the idolmaker and all the efforts these craftsmen have to go through to make their gods
2. But the true and living God is not like that! Actually, He is the one who has MADE the idol-maker! He knit this skilled craftsman together in his mother's womb

B. A Motionless God Cannot Save

1. This chapter contrasts the motionless idols with the living God
2. Idols that have to be lifted up and carried wherever they go cannot save anyone!
3. People bow down to these idols and cry out to them, but they cannot hear, cannot answer, cannot save

IV. Remember the God Who Plans and Orchestrates History (vs. 8-10)

Isaiah 46:8-10 "Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from

ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

A. The Call to Remember... and Repent

1. God calls on his idolatrous, rebellious people to remember and repent
2. God has ACTED IN HISTORY!! This history has been emblazoned in the minds of the Jewish nation, but they were forgetting
 - a. Remember the God who called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees
 - b. Remember the God who made a great nation out of this old man and his barren wife
 - c. Remember the God who chose Isaac, and then Jacob; and who multiplied Israel to millions in Egypt
 - d. Remember the God who sent Moses and worked the ten astonishing plagues... the God who turned the Nile River into blood, and who sent the frogs, and flies, and gnats, and boils, and hail, and darkness... the God who killed the firstborn of Egypt by the angel of death but who spared Israel by the blood of the Passover Lamb
 - e. Remember the God who led Israel by a pillar or cloud and fire through the Red Sea on dry ground, with the water walling up to the left and the right; who destroyed Pharaoh's army by those same waters
 - f. Remember the God who descended in fire on Mount Sinai, and who spoke the Ten Commandments to the nation
 - g. Remember the God who led Israel through the desert to the Promised Land, and who destroyed the walls of Jericho in an instant
3. The lifeless idols Bel and Nebo never did any of these things
4. But the Jews were REBELS he says, who were allured by these idols and who were bowing down to them

B. God Declares the End from the Beginning

1. God reminds the Jews that He is the only one who can know and declare the future... and He has done that through the prophets
2. Bel and Nebo have never done that!

C. God's Purpose Will Stand...to the Last Detail

Isaiah 46:10 I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

1. This is one of the greatest statements of the SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD over all events on earth that is found in the Bible
2. God has ordained whatsoever passes on planet earth! He is the sovereign King, and before the foundation of the world, He made a wise plan
3. That is why He can predict the future... because He has already planned it and His omnipotence will bring it about
4. The events of history are not random occurrences... they are part of what God has wisely and mysteriously planned out
5. What God “pleases” is to bring Himself glory in the salvation of His elect people from every nation on earth
6. And God will work out that plan IN DETAIL...

Isaiah 46:10 I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do ALL that I please.

V. God’s Plan: Bringing Salvation Near to Those Far Away (vs. 11-13)

Isaiah 46:11-13 From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do. Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are far from righteousness. I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel.

A. God Summons a “Bird of Prey” (Cyrus) to Achieve His Plan

1. The “bird of prey” image is powerful... like a violent eagle that swoops down from the heavens, so Cyrus will come from a far-off land to accomplish God’s purposes
2. He reiterates that everything has been planned out:

Isaiah 46:11 What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

B. God’s Plan: To Bring Salvation Near to Those Far Away

1. God speaks to stubborn, hard-hearted rebels who are FAR FROM RIGHTEOUSNESS

Romans 3:10-11 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

2. Because we idolaters were FAR FROM RIGHTEOUSNESS, God brings His righteousness near
3. For the Jews, that meant God's plan worked through Cyrus
4. For the world's sinners, that meant the coming of Jesus Christ into the world

Isaiah 46:13 - 47:1 I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel.

C. God's Ultimate Aim: His Glory in Zion

VI. Applications

A. What Are You Carrying?

1. None of you worship Bel or Nebo... those Babylonian gods are obsolete... Satan invented them, and now they have sunk into the dusty pages of history
2. But Satan has concocted many other gods to take their place... 21st Americans struggle with invisible heart idols
3. Remember Tim Keller's definition of idols

What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...

An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure."

4. Our idols always end up burdening us, weighing us down
5. Our idols make us stagger under their weight, and they don't lift a finger to help us
6. Our idols might be an unholy ambition to get rich
 - a. Picture yourself swimming with one arm around a heavy box of gold coins as you try to make it to the shore... but the box is weighing you down and its making you sink... your love for money is dragging you to your death, it's causing you to drown
 - i) Paul specifically warned against a love of money

1 Timothy 6:6-10 godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹ People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

- ii) Because of a love of money, you might be working extra hours to impress the boss
- iii) Because you are not content with a simple lifestyle, you have a high credit card debt and a chunk of your money every month is spent on high interest payments to Chase Manhattan or to Discover Card
- iv) Because you are not content with a simple house, you are tempted to overreach yourself on a mortgage and get a little more house than your budget will allow
- v) Because you are not content with simple meals, you eat out more than you should
- vi) At the root of all this discontent is an idol: the love of money and what it can buy

7. Perhaps your idol is work, achievement, accomplishment

- a. You are a beast of burden to a relentless ambition to achieve things
- b. You are a workaholic... you are a driven person... and you are addicted to the good feeling you get when you check three dozen boxes on a checklist, or achieve some difficult goal, or drive yourself to excel in prideful ways
- c. You are an achievement-oriented person who boasts often of those achievements... they could be academic, or professional, or just being a neat freak
- d. But you derive your sense of worth from these achievements
- e. They are the idols on your CART and you are dragging them everywhere you go

8. ON THE OTHER HAND... perhaps your idol is rest, ease, comfort, pleasure

- a. You live for pleasure, or for sleep, or for recreation
- b. You are the sluggard who can never sleep enough... and the idol of self-indulgence is a heavy burden you carry... it has help you back all your life

- c. Unlike the last idolater, you have been an underachiever and have failed to meet most of the normal expectations of life... you have been lazy and refused to push yourself
 - d. You are dragging a cart with a heavy idol of self-indulgence, overeating, living for pleasure, and it has burned away the best hours of many days
 - e. A subset of this pattern of idolatry is the idol of FOOD... many Americans live for FOOD—it's astonishing how many different restaurants there are in an average American town or city
9. Perhaps your idol is power, control
- a. You live for
10. Perhaps your idol is the approval of other people... and what a heavy burden that is!
- a. Every day you yearn to hear someone encourage you, praise you, notice you, approve of you
 - b. You drag around this heavy idol everywhere you go
 - c. You can't take criticism, are prickly and irritable if people aren't happy with you
 - d. Your whole day can go down the drain if someone insults you or even just fails to praise something you've done
 - e. You tell stories about yourself to try to earn people's approval
 - f. You may even twist the truth when it suits you so that people will think well of you
 - g. Every moment of every day, some other person holds the key to your happiness... you are dragging around that heavy idol wherever you go
11. Some people make an idol of their bodies
- a. They live for physical fitness... they go to the workout gym and achieve personal goals... they love to look at themselves in the mirror, to see how ripped they are...
 - b. Or perhaps they live for beauty... they work constantly on their hair, their face, their "look"... they make it a goal to look their best at every moment... they live for being praised for their beauty; they spend a ton of money on jewelry or clothing... always up on the recent styles

- c. It is a heavy burden then carry around constantly... they fear AGING and will fight it tooth and nail, with cosmetic surgery and any technique
 - d. Part of this could be making an idol of dieting, of eating precisely the best foods—gluten-free, or low-cal, or vegan, or whatever the perfectly balanced diet is for you... they want their bodies to be as healthy as possible and put a ton of time, energy, and money into making certain their bodies are as perfect as possible
12. OR PERHAPS your idol is something more secret, more shameful, something you haven't told anyone else about
- a. There could be people here struggling with addictions—to pornography, or to alcohol, or to drugs—and these idols are like 100 pound weights dragging your straight down
 - b. You don't know how to be free from these idols... you are like the beast of burden pulling the cart with these ponderous idols slowly dragging behind you
 - c. You can even picture them alive, and lashing you with the whip
 - d. These idols are cruel, relentless taskmasters... they will never let their slaves go
 - e. Christ alone can set you free from this slavery!!

John 8:34, 36 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Jesus can break the power of every idol and set every captive free!!

He can smash the idols of your heart and make the glory of God the central desire of your heart

This is what the gospel can do!!

B. Look Again at the Living God of the Bible... the Living God of Isaiah 46

1. He is a God who carries you... you don't carry Him!
2. He is a God who takes initiative with you... you can never take initiative on Him
3. He is a God who loved you before you were born, who calls you by name before you knew His name

4. He is a God who sustains you every single moment of your existence, for “in Him we live and move and have our being”... but He is not dependent on anything outside Himself for His own existence... He is the self-existent God, the mover and shaker of all history
5. He raises up the great leaders of the world, they don't raise Him up
6. He is the God who has taken initiative to save us idolaters from the heavy burdens we are dragging around... these deadly idols whose weight will drag us down to the grave
7. He is the God who sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die on a cross and save us from these burdens...
8. TRUST IN HIM!!
9. This is the God who calls on you now to cast all your burdens on Him... He is no burden you need to carry

1 Peter 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

C. Trust in Him for the Rest of Your Lives

Isaiah 46:4 Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

1. You're going to get older, get weaker, lose capability and die
2. Your old age will come, if you live a normal life
3. Your hair will turn grey... FEAR NOT! The same God who made who has promised He will sustain you for the rest of your life... He will CARRY YOU every single step of the way
4. This doesn't mean that you don't make effort, that you don't walk
5. But IN HIM you live, IN HIM you move, IN HIM you have your being... IN CHRIST and by His power you will walk

D. Trust in Him to Raise You from the Dead

1. He has said He will RESCUE US...
2. The final enemy is DEATH... and Christ will rescue us from the dead
3. The nation had a chance to stare into the face of death again this week when young Brittany Maynard decided to end her life rather than face the painful journey of death by cancer...

4. Christians have learned from Christ not to fear death—neither the humiliating process of it or its final outcome... we die daily so that we can die well in the end
5. She advocated “Death with dignity”... but no one has shown more dignity in death than did Jesus Christ; and by His Spirit we can face death unashamed and unafraid... and if death ravages our bodies, we will not be ashamed:

Job 19:25-27 I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. ²⁶ And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; ²⁷ I myself will see him with my own eyes-- I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

6. We must learn to rely on this God who carries us even to our old age and gray hair, and to rest on Him to the grave and beyond

John 6:40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

So... what IDOLS are you dragging behind you? Let Christ CUT THE CHAIN that binds you to each of your idols

Look to Christ every moment and understand how powerfully He is carrying you through all the trials He has ordained for you

And trust in Him to help you even to your old age and gray hairs... AND BEYOND... to RAISE YOU FROM THE DEAD

He is the God who carries you... into heaven in resurrection glory!!