**Battle of the gods**

**August 5, 2018**

On October 30, 1999, Egypt Air 990, a Boeing 747 left Kennedy Airport in New York bound for Cairo with 217 on board. Thirty-one minutes after takeoff the plane nose-dived into the Atlantic Ocean 60 miles south of Nantucket.

The 747 is designed to fly on auto-pilot for most its journey. It’s not idiot proof but under normal circumstances it will correct minor errors and changes in conditions and fly safely from point A to point B will little or no human influence. This particular airplane, however experienced catastrophic failure.

At 1:49:53 in the morning radar showed Flight 990 at 33,000 feet. Then at successive twelve second intervals radar read 31,500, 25,400, 18,300…

The plane was piloted by Ahmad al-Habashi and co-piloted by Gameel al-Batouti. Later investigation showed that at 1:48:30 alone in the cockpit as Habashi had gone to a bathroom, Batuoti shouted “*I rely on God!*” The throttles moved to minimum idle and the pitch control surfaces at the tail dropped to a dangerous down position.

Capt. Habashi made his way back into the cock-pit and there followed a struggle for control of the airplane, but it was too late to save Flight 990. Traveling now at 527 mph passengers and crew experienced 2.6 gs of force as the craft began to break apart.

The left engine had fell off and the she was shedding her skin. It was over in matter of seconds.

The struggle for control of Egypt Air Flight 990 illustrates what many people, Christians included experience: a struggle for control of our hearts and minds. It’s a battle of the gods. We want to live for Jesus but there are other things, other gods that want to control our lives. In our homes and businesses and even in our churches, there is a struggle for control.

As Christianity was really beginning to blossom under the influence of Paul’s preaching the Gospel to the Gentile world, the Gentile world began to fight back. We saw in Acts 16 how some men responded to losing money because of the power of Jesus’ name when a slave they owned who was a fortune teller lost her ability to “see the future”.

Remember? That’s the story where Paul and Silas ended up in jail having a worship service at midnight with their feet in wooden stocks after having been brutally beaten.

Last week we considered how the power of Jesus’ name enabled Christians to effectively live for Jesus. Today we’ll look at the struggle that goes on for control of our hearts and minds. This is a struggle we probably all face.

Before I go on I want to point out two verses that almost seem out of place. Acts 19:21f tell us that Paul made plans to return to Jerusalem but also that he felt he “**must** also visit Rome”. He doesn’t say if it was his own feeling or from the Holy Spirit. He would in fact eventually get to Rome, but not as he planned. He would get there as prisoner. We’ll get to that in a few weeks.

Acts 19:23f

Now, *About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen.* Acts 19:23f

This was in Ephesus, the Treasure House of Asia. At the mouth of the Cayster River, Ephesus controlled trade into Asia Minor thus it was prosperous both commercially and politically. Ephesus was the site of a regional Roman court where legal cases were tried.

There was a theater seating 25,000 people hosting among other things an Olympic type athletic event called the Pan-Ionian Games. There were plenty of brothels catering to the many traveling businessmen.

And there was the Temple of Artemis, a spectacular structure 425’ long, 220’ wide and 60’ high, with 127 pillars made of marble and bedazzled with precious jewels and gold.

On the altar was a black statue carved by Praxiteles, an ancient Greek sculptor. This idol of Artemis sported about a dozen breasts symbolizing her role as goddess of fertility and prosperity. The Latin name for her is Diana.

The especially superstitious Ephesians believed that Artemis was more powerful than the spirits that caused illness, disease, and mental illness.

Demetrius brought together a coalition of tradesmen who were all losing money as people turned control of their hearts and minds from superstition to Jesus. He made this impassioned plea:

*Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all.*

*There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”* Vs. 25-27

The content of this speech revealed what Paul had preached: *False gods are impotent and idols are useless*. That was Paul’s message. Demetrius appealed both the greed and superstition of his friends. *Not only are we losing money, this Paul is insulting our goddess!*

Well it doesn’t take much to rile up a crowd. We see it in the anti-Trump rallies. I haven’t seen as much hatred expressed since the anti-war protests of the 60’s. Interview after interview shows that most protestors can’t tell you anything specific they hate about Trump. They’re just there to protest.

“*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!*” (verse 28) they shouted. Over and over for two hours!

Just like the protests rallies of today*, The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.* A more literal translation is, *the most did not know for what cause they had come together*. Verse 32

The point to notice is that when you start messing with peoples’ beliefs, whether they’re sensible or not, they get worked up. In this case they shouted Paul down even though his message was clear and logical.

The crowd attacked Paul’s companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, were in the marketplace right then. Paul wanted to join them but his other friends told him not to go. Even some of the government officials, *Chiefs of Asia* urged him to stay away from the riot. They were right. You can’t reason with a mob.

The Jews in Ephesus were afraid that the mob would blame them for Paul’s teaching so they tried to intervene, which they did by throwing one of their own under the bus. “*They pushed Alexander forward*.” Vs. 33 It was like the old TV gag, *I need one volunteer*. Everybody but one stepped back leaving that guy singled out.

Finally one guy, the γραμματευς, some sort of city official whose job was to report events in writing to Rome, took over the mob with some common sense. (This is paraphrase.)

*Fact, we all agree that Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. You have attacked these men not for committing a crime but for saying something you disagree with. There is legal redress if you want to press civil charges. Otherwise the Romans are going to be unhappy with this riot and they’ll take it out on all of us*.

That got their attention. The mob settled down and went home.

When you start messing with peoples’ beliefs, whether these beliefs are sensible or not, they react. That’s true not just of people who worship stone or wooden images of their god.

It’s often true even of people who believe in God and Jesus His Son. When you challenge what people understand of Jesus and what they do or don’t do in Jesus’ name they don’t like it.

Idol worship is not always bowing in front of a statue. Idol worship is anything that takes our focus off of God and puts it on something else. An idol doesn’t necessarily begin as a bad thing. Even religion can be an idol.

For example, if someone, maybe a church, creates a set of beliefs and practices that aren’t beyond God’s Word, that religion often becomes an idol. Don’t try messing with their beliefs.

Idol worship is serious because it drags people away from God causing them to hold tightly to their mistaken belief. And it’s serious because God hates it.

In Ezekiel 14 some Elders of Israel wanted to speak to God through the prophet Ezekiel. God wouldn’t let them because…*they had set up idols in their hearts*. Ezekiel 14:3 The idols caused them and others to stumble.

It was a struggle for control of the hearts and minds of the people of Ephesus that day and every day.

Because Satan wants to destroy your and my relationship with Jesus, there’s a struggle for control of our hearts and minds. A struggle between God Himself and the idols we create and worship.

At the risk of scuffing your pedicures let me give you some examples of the kind of idol worship I’m talking about.

1.    People

It’s not unusual for a Christian to stand strong when other Christians are around, but get them alone or with a bunch of guys who aren’t Jesus followers and they bend their standards to fit the group. The people around them become idols, having more effect on them than their faith in Jesus.

Sometimes Christians are so committed to a particular teacher or leader that their own faith stands or falls depending on that individual. Who were they following? God? Or that person? This is a form of idol worship. Our allegiance should be to Christ not to a person.

2.    Another form of idol worship is pleasure seeking.

Have you ever heard of Epicureanism? It’s a philosophy that “matter” is all that exists. The world is a chance but fortuitous combination of atoms resulting in life. The highest goal of life is to enjoy pleasure.

Cleverly named after Epicurus, Epicureanism teaches that there is no heaven and no hell so every man should spend his life in the pursuit of pleasure.

Do you know anyone who puts pleasure before all other things including God? The Bible says “*in the last days people will…be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God*” (2 Timothy 3:1-4) Even if it’s not all the time, if it’s true it’s a problem for a Christian.

The Psalmist wrote, “*You have made known to me the path of life;* Y*ou will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand.”* Psalm 16:11 Seeking pleasure outside of God can become idol worship.

3.    Materialism

Christians are not immune from building our egos based on what we own, the stuff we collect. How often have you turned down a church activity because you were too busy attending to your possessions – home, cars, toys, etc.

I would challenge you to measure your time spend on your stuff versus your time engaged in spiritual activities.

More, bigger, better aren’t bad words but they often get in the way of Godly, Christ-like, and holy.

If pursuing material things gets between you and God, it’s idol worship.

4.    Ourselves

People kneel before the unholy trinity: me, myself, and I. My needs and wants come before what the Lord wants. God is forced to take a backseat to what serves me.

Self-worship is seen in self-indulgence, self-promotion, self-will, self-sufficiency, self-preservation, self-gratification, self-service, self-esteem, self-righteousness…

How many young women have been driven to depression and eating disorders trying to find esteem in their looks, ignoring that they are who God says they are? How many men have lost their families because of neglect as they pursued career?

Do you get the picture? Idol worship is whatever you spend time, money, and energy on that you are not willing to give up to worship and serve the Lord. Maybe it’s pride, or entertainment or rules or hatred or fear or worry or the world itself.

Almost anything can become idol worship if it takes your focus off of God and onto something else. These are the gods that struggle for control of our hearts and minds. They demand our time, our attention, our energy, our money. It’s a real battle of gods.

I’m not trying to beat anyone up. I know you’ve never knelt or bowed before a statue or picture. But many, maybe even some here today, have deferred from the things of God in pursuit of earthly things.

I want you to think about whatever might get between you and God. What keeps you from living like the Christians of the Book of Acts? What other “gods” struggle for control of your heart and mind?

This really matters. God said in the Ten Commandments, *I am the Lord your God. You must not have any other god before me*. Exodus 20:2f If anything in your life comes before God it’s an idol and you’re worshiping it.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind*.” Matthew 22:37 You can’t love God like that if you love something else like that.

God hates idol worship for two reasons.

One is that it gets between us and Himself. God loves us and wants a relationship with us. He gave His Son so to make us righteous and so we could live in communion with Him. He doesn’t want anything to come between.

Understand this truth: we each will serve one god or another. Bob Dylan wrote a song years ago about this. *You’re gonna have to serve somebody*, He sang. No matter who you are or what kind of person you are, *You’re gonna have to serve somebody*”.

         Maybe it’s rock-n-roll, maybe it’s drugs

         Maybe it’s power, maybe it’s money

         Maybe it’s pleasure, maybe it’s fame

*It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but You’re gonna have to serve somebody*.

Bob Dylan was right. You WILL serve one god or another. You know what idols battle for your attention. Only you can decide whom you will serve.

A second reason God hates idol worship is because what we worship we become like. Let that sink in.

If you worship God you become like God. If you worship a person or money or pleasure, that’s what you become.

Ralph Waldo Emmerson wrote, *The Gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. A man will worship something, have no doubt about that either. He may think that his tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of his heart, but it will come out. That which dominates will determine his life and character*.

You will become like what you worship. You choose.

We can illustrate with this concept this story related by James Michener from 2200 BC: A farmer named Urbaai worshiped two gods, one a god of death, the other a goddess of fertility.

One day the temple priest told Urbaai: *Bring your young son to the temple for sacrifice if you wanted good crops.* Urbaai obeyed. On the appointed day he dragged his son and unwilling wife to the temple for the boys “religious execution” and sacrificed him to a fiery god of death.

After this and several other boys’ deaths the priest announced that one of the fathers will spend the next week in the temple with a temple prostitute. Urbaai’s wife was stunned to see her husband volunteer.

After a ceremony committing Urbaai to this ritual, his wife left the temple with her head down and mind spinning. She said to another of the wives, “*If he had different gods he would be a different man*.”

The man or woman you are is determined by what is your god, who you serve whether Jesus or anything else.

There’s a struggle for our hearts and minds that we all face, a battle of gods. It’s a struggle between the idols we create for ourselves that want to control our lives versus the God who loves us and wants us to be free. It’s a struggle that God must win.

Who are you allowing to win?