

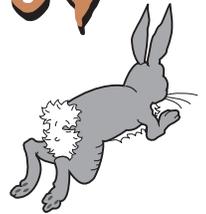


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Tracking Down Idols And Finding Joy

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Jackrabbit Tracks

One early morning at the ranch in Mexico, I hiked into the hills with Uncle Hector in search of his wandering mule. Hector amazed me with his ability to spot the mule's tracks in the dusty trails, amidst the criss-crossed prints of countless cows and other animals. He admitted that cow prints are difficult to tell apart, but explained that beasts of burden tend to have distinctive hoof marks. As we marched through a narrow canyon, Hector suddenly slowed his gait and pointed out fresh jackrabbit tracks to me. He unslung his ancient .22 and crept forward, scanning the brush with his narrowed eyes. Sure enough, a jackrabbit promptly hopped out of the brush and onto the trail. Hector immediately began an oscillating whistle and the rabbit stopped to listen—to its doom. Hector quickly found the mule, too, though it was two kilometers from home and hidden in a thicket. Once Uncle Hector found tracks, game was as good as “in the bag” and livestock was quickly retrieved.

We can't all learn to be the outdoor tracker that Uncle Hector is, but I hope that the following article will sharpen your spiritual tracking abilities. I hope to put you on the trail to some idols that we all struggle with. I want to help you to “bag” some idols, and bring joy back to the home corral.

What's An Idol?

I became a Christian when I read 1 John 5.21 in Ken Taylor's Living Bible paraphrase: “Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.” As I read that verse, I realized with a sudden and profound conviction that I was a sinner in need of salvation simply because I had no interest in my Creator. Later, when I read a standard translation, I discovered that what John had actually written

was, “Dear children guard yourselves from *idols*.” Forever after, I’ve been grateful for Ken Taylor’s insight. Whereas before I had thought of idols only as golden calves worshipped in antiquity, Taylor made me realize that anything that takes precedence over God in my life is, in effect, an idol, be it a sports car or success in business.

Idols Behind Idols

It’s important to realize, however, that sports cars or any other *things* that we idolize are usually only the facades of our true idols. Even the golden calves of antiquity were only lustrous symbols masking darker realities. The apostle Paul explained that when people sacrificed to idols it was blasphemous, not because the idol itself was anything, but because the sacrifice actually honored demonic entities represented by the idols (1 Corinthians 10.19,20). While our idols don’t necessarily represent demonic spirits, they usually do mask the “inner demons” of our instinctive longings. For example, no one really idolizes money, although we often speak as if they did. We realize that the most greedy miser would not hoard currency that had no purchasing power. The miser’s real idol is something behind the money. What he really longs for is something like security or happiness. This brings us to two realizations: our real idols are *nonmaterial* things, and they are *good things wrongly pursued*.

The Heavenly Idol of Romantic Love

Let me illustrate by imagining a single woman—let’s call her Jane—who “just has to have a date on Friday night.” We might be tempted to think that Jane idolizes guys, when in fact the real idol is something much less tangible, like romantic love. She feels a giant ache in her heart, an ache called loneliness, and she’s looking as hard as she can for the remedy which is intimacy. Does this mean that romantic love or intimacy is wrong? No, far from it! Romantic love and intimacy are *virtuous things*, but if that’s true, how can they be idols? The answer is that romantic love, like security or peace or any other such *ideal condition*, becomes an idol when we seek its ultimate realization in anything temporal, whether that temporal thing is material or relational. What Jane seeks is actually a virtuous thing, a thing God has designed her to seek, but whether or not it is an idol for her depends on how and where she seeks it.

Let’s imagine that Jane finds a loving man and gets married. When the honeymoon’s over she’ll discover that while the ache in her heart has subsided, *it hasn’t disappeared*. As a matter of fact, in some ways the ache has deepened, and this is when the real test of idolatry occurs. Jane can respond one of two ways to the continuing ache: she can blame her new husband for not curing it completely, or she can recognize that she’s on the right track because the ache *is* partly cured. If she blames her husband for not curing the ache, she is an idolater, because she is demanding that her deepest need, in fact an infinite need, be met by something apart from her Creator, the only infinite Person. She has in fact idolized intimacy or romance by saying, “Give me the cure to this ache, but leave God out of it!” On the other hand, Jane could reason another way. She could say to herself, “My husband has partially alleviated the ache; this implies that *relationship* is the answer, but I apparently need relationship with someone even greater than my husband.” This line of reasoning could put her on the right track, if she can realize further that she does indeed need someone *greater* than her husband, not just someone different. If she can realize that she needs someone greater than *any man*, she will realize that the ultimate answer to her ache is relationship with God. If she can then embrace this realization, she can rejoice that her marriage gives her a taste of God and points her toward ultimate union with Him (Psalm 34.8). If Jane takes this latter course, she is no idolater for she fastens her heart on the eternal rather than temporal satisfaction of her inner longing.

Hunting Down Our Idols

What if we’re still pursuing temporal answers to our longings, though? How on earth are we going to recognize idolatry in ourselves? How can we track down our idols if true idols are actually *virtuous things* like peace and security? Even if we’re wrongly pursuing something like security, won’t we just rationalize our pursuit by the fact that everyone needs security? “How can it be wrong when it feels so right?” The answer is that virtuous things betray themselves as idols when they produce anger or anxiety within us. The first thing that an idolatrous pursuit produces is disappointment, the inevitable result of seeking our happiness in temporal things that can slip through our fingers. Disappointment is not wrong, however, it is only the “Dead End” sign posted on a wrong path to ultimate satisfaction. Imagine again how our Jane is disappointed after her honey-

moon when she discovers that the inner ache still persists. As in her case, it is our *response* to the disappointment that shows whether we are idolaters or not.

If our response to disappointment is the realization that our deepest hungers can only be satisfied along another path, by something beyond the temporal, well and good. If, however, our response to disappointment is anger, resentment, or bitterness, it proves that we are insisting on the path of our own choosing, and have been seeking to satisfy our deepest hungers with temporal and vulnerable things. Along with anger and resentment, anxiety is another sign of idolatry; not the momentary anxiety of a crisis that prompts us to appropriate action, but the chronic worry or fear of temporal loss. Since our temporal sources of security, peace, happiness, etc., whether they be things or relationships, are constantly being frustrated or lost to us, looking to them for our happiness inevitably breeds anxiety. In contrast, the Eternal Source of peace, security, acceptance, love, and joy cannot be frustrated or taken from us, and a focused pursuit of Him defeats anxiety (Romans 8.37-39). Therefore, whether we appropriately worship the Eternal Source of happiness, or idolatrously “worship” temporal sources of happiness is demonstrated by whether our life is characterized by joy or by anger and anxiety.

Anger and anxiety, then, become the footprints of our idols. To hunt down our idols, we need only follow these tracks. We *must* track down the idols in our lives, because until we identify our idols, we will never repent of them. We will never repent of unidentified idols because we will rationalize them and mistake them for justified pursuits. Until we identify our idols, we will blame other people and circumstances for our unhappiness, rather than recognize the affliction brought upon us by our own idolatry.

Since we must identify our idols, we pick up the trail of our resentments and our anxieties and go through a little process. We need to follow the path of our anger or anxiety to that good thing that we are seeking in the wrong place. Suppose we have anger. We analyze it and realize it is anger toward our spouse for the way they fail to reassure us of their love. We ask ourselves why that makes us angry. What is it that we’re really after and not getting? Perhaps it’s security. Having once identified that virtuous thing we’re after, we can ask God to show us the problem with our pursuit: “God, if I’m not supposed to find security in the love of my spouse, then where?” If we will go this far in the process, God is faithful to show us our problem *and the solution*. God will show us that He never intended for us to find ultimate security in our spouse, but only in Him, and His grace will move us to repent at His feet for having ever sought to satisfy our longings apart from Him who is the only Eternal Satisfaction.

Finding Joy

A Giant Idol Pops Out Of The Brush

This point of repentance should be the end of the idol trail, and we should find joy right here. At the moment we repent of our idols, we should experience a renewed sense of God’s presence, and the exhilaration of knowing that we are winning the game of life even when it may look like we are losing. However, it’s also at this point that we may come face to face with one of the greatest idols of all. Like Hector’s jackrabbit, it pops suddenly out of the brush and onto our path, but it is no diminutive creature. It is a *giant* and it blocks our way to the joy waiting nearby. This idol is so much a part of our being that we have to cast aside our lesser idols before we even suspect its existence. It is so much a part of us that we never see it, but always look through it. It is the unconscious combination of all our false ideas about how to satisfy our longings. It is the idol of our false “world view,” the sum total of our most fundamental but erroneous assumptions about what the universe is about and how it should work.

The Problem Of The Self-Centered Universe

It is part of the curse upon our world that, in the course of life, none of us fully escapes the deception that we ourselves are the center of the universe. With that self-centeredness comes a list of inalienable rights that we imagine ourselves to have. While the list varies slightly from person to person, perhaps the most ubiquitous of our assumed rights are that:

1. We should be the proprietor of our own life, choosing our own agenda without any compulsion or determination by another.
2. We should be the beneficiary of whatever purpose there is to our existence.
3. Life should not include suffering as an inevitable component.

It's this list that bars us from joy. God's arms open to embrace us as we repent of our lesser idols, but we stop short of His embrace *because we don't want to embrace His agenda for the universe*. Instead we embrace the warm and fuzzy idol of our own world view and wonder why joy eludes us.

Why Joy Eludes Us

Joy slips from our grasp because joy requires reality as a basis. No one feels joy when they try to believe something that isn't true, and our conception of a self-centered universe isn't true. You see, the Bible declares plainly that we are not the proprietors of our own being. The Bible says that God owns everything, whether in heaven or on earth (Deuteronomy 10.14; Job 41.11; Psalm 50.12), and specifically that He owns every soul (Ezekiel 18.4), and particularly the souls that He has purchased with the blood of His son, who are therefore *not* their own (1 Corinthians 6.19,20). Furthermore, the Scriptures quite plainly declares that everything exists *for* God (Romans 11.36; Colossians 1.16), and that ultimately He is the beneficiary of even our existence (1 Corinthians 3.22,23; 8.6). As for whose agenda will prevail, Proverbs 16.9 tells us that "The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord [imperceptibly] directs his steps." Proverbs 19.21 confirms, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." Lest there be any ambiguity, Philippians 2.13 tells us that God is the indiscernible impetus even behind our supposedly "free" will. Since God is the invisible author of our very thoughts, it should not surprise us that we have "been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will..." (Ephesians 1.11), and "that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose" (Romans 8.28). Finally, and quite distastefully for our selfish selves, suffering *is* an integral component of God's agenda for life in this present age. Because we are members of a fallen race, we observe that "man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward" (Job 5.7). It is particularly true for Christians that "in the world you have tribulation" (John 16.33), because anyone pursuing righteousness discovers that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14.22). The apostle Peter was compelled to warn believers, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, *as though some strange thing were happening to you*" (1 Peter 4.12).

The Death We Have To Die

We discover to the deep chagrin of our self-centered selves that God has designed the human experience of this age in a way wholly contrary to our most cherished assumptions. This brings us to the great crossroads. To have joy, we must embrace God. To embrace God, *we must embrace His agenda*, and embracing His agenda means embracing the fact that *His agenda is better than our own!* The crucial decision is whether or not to die in order to experience joy, and the death that we must die is the death to self, i.e., the death to our own agenda. This is what Jesus meant when He said that we must "take up our cross" daily and follow Him (Luke 9.23). Only by trading our agenda of self-advancement for God's agenda of redemptive suffering can we experience joy in this life.

Trading Agendas In Real Life

What does this taking up of the cross and trading of agendas look like in real life? Only rarely does it look like foreign missionaries martyred at spear point. More often, redemptive suffering takes the form of an endless series of inward transactions that occur at the moment of our little disappointments. At the moment that we wreck the car or at the moment when unwanted company arrives at the door, we have the choice of trading our own agenda for God's providential and redemptive plan. If we accept our circumstances grudgingly, it shows that we still cling to the idol of a self-centered universe and our own imagined rights. But if we have overcome that great idol and believe that God really is working "*all things*" together for our good (Romans 8.28), we realize that our car wreck or unpleasant company is the best thing that could possibly happen to us at that juncture, and we're suddenly flooded with a joy that almost feels conspiratorial as we share God's secret of saving our lives by enabling us to lose them (Luke 9.24)!



A Hasty Qualification

I hasten to reassure you, dear reader, that I don't propose living in denial! Tragedies demand grief. There is a time to weep and mourn (Ecclesiastes 3.4; Romans 12.15). What I am insisting upon is that genuine joy shines even through sorrow (2 Corinthians 6.10). Neither do I negate our imperative to work for the alleviation of all kinds of suffering. I don't propose that a person in a dysfunctional marriage seek only an inner peace without pursuing appropriate counseling, nor that a person with an oppressive job never seek a better career. I only emphasize the fact that ultimate happiness does not depend upon external circumstances, and that unhappiness will follow us even into an ideal marriage or career *if* we continue to carry our idols with us.

Conclusion

So what is it that you're really after? I can assure you that what you really desire deep down inside is exactly what God has for you, but it is only fully found in Him. Only the Infinite and Eternal One can satisfy the deepest longings of your heart. Track down your idols and repent of them so that you can fully embrace Him. Let God fill you with joy. Taste heaven.

