

THE LIVING ROOM SERIES

NO OTHER GODS

THE UNRIVALED
PURSUIT OF CHRIST



REVISED & EXPANDED

KELLY MINTER

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Kelly Minter is a Bible teacher, author, and singer/songwriter with a desire to serve women of all ages. She has found deep hope and healing through the Bible's truths, making her message personal and relational. Along with her love of Scripture, at the core of her ministry is a deep affection for worship, prayer, and missions, which she blends together at her women's event called Cultivate: A Women's

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Kelly's in-depth Bible studies include: *Ruth: Loss, Love & Legacy*, a study that follows the redemptive story of Ruth, displaying God's providence and purpose even in the most trying circumstances; *Nehemiah: A Heart That Can Break*, an unforgettable journey into the missional heart of God; *What Love Is: The Letters of 1, 2, 3 John*, a study on the love of Christ through the pen of the beloved disciple; and *All Things New: A Study on 2 Corinthians*, our call as believers to shine brightly and distinctly in our current culture. Kelly's music includes *Hymns & Hallelujahs*, which accompanies her *All Things New* Bible study.

Kelly's first memoir, *Wherever the River Runs: How a Forgotten People Renewed My Hope in the Gospel*, is about her life-changing journeys to the Amazon jungle with Justice & Mercy International. Kelly partners closely with JMI, an organization that cares for the vulnerable and forgotten in the Amazon and Moldova. To view more about Kelly's studies, books, music, and Cultivate events, visit www.kellyminter.com.

INTRODUCTION

This Bible study about modern-day idolatry began on a Wednesday night. I couldn't tell you what I wore or what passage of Scripture we studied. You see, this took place before the advent of social media. In other words, before every detail would have been photographed and documented, even down to the flower vases. I invited four of my girlfriends, Lauri, Alli, Anadara, and Carrie, to a Bible study I had yet to write, on a topic still to be determined. Oh, and I had no real experience in writing or teaching Bible studies either—turns out you have to start somewhere.

Making up for the lack of general appeal I decided to offer dinner as part of the package. However, it didn't occur to me until about ten minutes before everyone arrived, and after my dish towel caught fire, that I actually didn't know how to cook. Looking back, it seems a miracle that this study made it past the welcome mat of my condo much less into a rewritten edition a decade later. See? We really do have an all-powerful God.

As I write this new version of *No Other Gods*, I'm both deeply grateful and sobered. Grateful because the Lord did not spare me His severe mercy in dismantling the idols for whom I was living at the time. Sobered because if left to my own desires and rationale I would have missed the unsurpassed blessings I've experienced on the other side of that deconstruction.

I would have missed nearly a decade of dynamic mission trips down the Amazon River on a boat named *The Discovery*. I would have missed the rich community I now have, my church, and the privilege of working with orphans in Moldova. Peace would have been distinctly absent from my life. I wouldn't have been spiritually healthy enough to sustain my dearest friendships or been as present as I needed to be for the six nieces and nephews who call me Aunt. (Actually, they just call me Kelly. I'm trying to be cool and let this go.) And I would have missed an unencumbered walk with Jesus, the peak of all blessings. **Simply put, on the other side of my strongholds and ruthless attachments lay surprises I couldn't have imagined that night in my living room with those four girls.**

While the blessings of an unrivaled pursuit of Christ run deep for each of us, confronting our modern-day idols is tricky business—false gods just don't stand out like they used to. It's easy to identify a looming statue that a pagan king exalted as an idol in Old Testament times—a man-made golden calf is clearly not the one true God, at least in hindsight. We muse *Why did the ancients ever fall for such things?*

I've discovered that in all our modern-day sophistication, our idols may look different, but our enslavement to them is the same. For many of us, our false gods look more like smartphones than statues. Our idols show up in clothing catalogues and home blogs. They lunge into our inboxes with "must haves" and "don't miss outs," promising to satisfy our longings. Even when we're simply catching up on our social media feeds, we're suddenly aware of what we don't have but really, really want. We end up saddled with jealousy and feelings of being left out, not realizing those reactions are rooted in the gods we think we need for life and happiness.

Even if you've somehow managed to circumvent technology, you may not be as home free as you think. False gods can masquerade as material possessions, entertainment, food, academic pursuits, investment portfolios, bosses, spouses or friends, or even our ministries. Identifying them, let alone contending with them, can be challenging stuff.

Because I know that freedom is possible and the unrivaled pursuit of Jesus Christ worth it, I've returned ten years later to bring this study to you anew. What you hold in your hands is my life message. I've looked to myriad pleasures to satisfy the ache in my soul, hoping I'd find fulfillment and meaning. I've bought the lie that if I could just have this person or that measure of success, life would finally be all I'd hoped it would be. But nothing has brought me the joy, freedom, and happiness that Christ has given me. No person has plumbed the depths of my heart or revealed its truest desires like He has.

While on the brink of a decision of faith, a friend of mine once said, "In fifteen years I don't want to look back and wonder what God would have done; I want to look back and say, 'Look what He did.'" The idols of our day are tired, predictable, but there's no telling what Jesus will do with a life wholly spent in pursuit of Him. No god can compare to Jesus. He is Lord of all, the great King and Redeemer, Creator and Savior. There is simply no one like Him.





SESSION ONE VIEWER GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

GROUP DISCUSSION

What one thing from this video teaching really resonated with you? Why?

What do you hope to gain from this study and the time spent together?

How would you define a modern-day idol?

As we begin this study, are you already aware of possible false gods in your life? If you're comfortable sharing with the group, explain.

How have you found yourself trying to serve God and your idols? What tensions have you discovered?

What is hindering you from letting go of your false gods?

Video sessions available for purchase or rent at [LIFEWAY.COM/NOOTHERGODS](https://www.lifeway.com/nothergods)



SESSION TWO

PERSONAL GODS

I recently watched my six-year-old nephew, Will, and my five-year-old niece, Harper, play back-to-back soccer games on a Saturday afternoon. Who needs nationally televised college football games when you can catch Team Snickers take on Team Skittles? Right. Watching a kids' soccer game is a fascinating pastime—it's the only sporting event in the world where the ball is in charge. Wherever it goes, so go a swarm of children. At that age, there's little strategy and no spacing of the players across the field. It's basically sixty minutes of babysitting with exercise thrown in.

Will and Harper were especially cute in their cleats, shin guards, shiny shorts, and jerseys. There's something endearing about a child in sporting apparel, holding an enormous bottle of Gatorade®, having no idea what the point of the game is. The lack of soccer acumen was evident when my brother David knelt down, looked Harper dead in the eye, and gave her this coaching tip: "When someone from the other team has the ball, you're allowed to run up and steal it!"

"Dad," Harper said while pointing at his shoulder, "You have a bug on your shirt."

It's easy to sit on the sideline in my camping chair and chuckle at these little ones playing so hard at a game they don't really understand. But the lesson wasn't

lost on me. Too many times I've worn all the right Christian gear, run from one end of ministry to the other, watched the latest piece of theology being kicked back and forth over social media, and still totally missed the goal. I've tired myself to the bone on good Christian activities, forgetting why I'd engaged in those activities in the first place.

Jesus addressed the church of Ephesus in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 2:1-7). He praised them for their labor, their endurance of hardship for His name, their strong stance against evil people, and their resilience in not growing weary through trials. In other words, they were looking pretty good in their Christian uniforms. They had sprinted all over the field, even

coming through with some defensive slide tackles against the evildoers. But Jesus had this one thing against them: They had forsaken their first love. They'd abandoned

It will all be for your love of Jesus. He is why we're here.

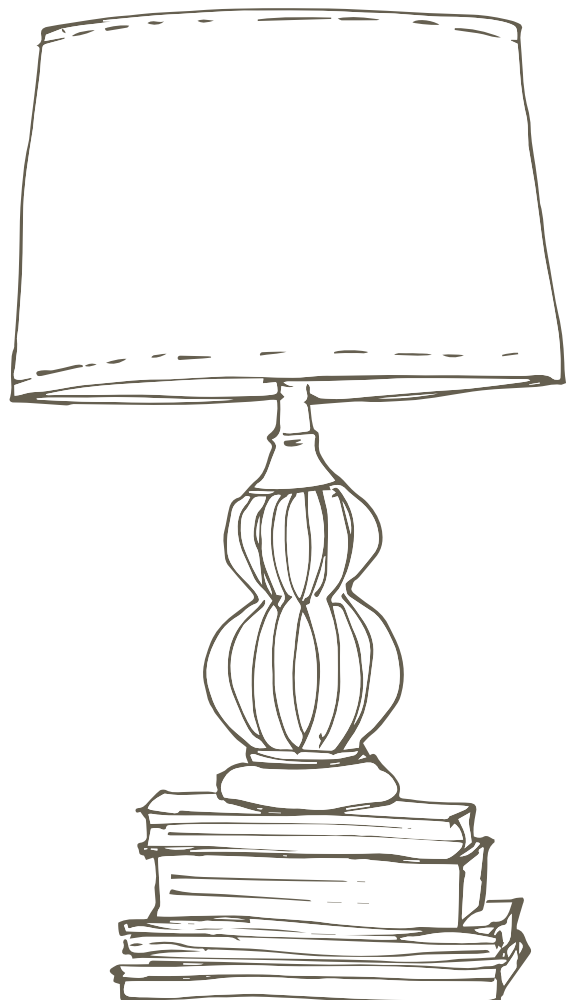
Him as the treasure of their hearts. They'd forgotten the whole point of their faith.

If I have one prayer for you over the next eight weeks it's that as you confront the modern-day idols of your heart you'll reclaim your first love for Jesus. Yes, you'll grow in Bible knowledge, strengthen your faith, gain insight into the reasons you're attached to certain false gods, **but it will all be for your love for Jesus.** You'll surrender certain idols to Him and lay other ones down, and you'll peer into the blessings that come from a life of obedience. But none of this will matter if along the way you lose sight of Jesus, the One for whom you're doing all this hard work. He is why we're here. I pray each page of this study ultimately points to Him.

Get ready for this journey to be personal. Dealing with your false gods isn't something you can do from an emotionally distant place. Idolatry is too bound up in our hearts for us to fight it with self-righteous intellectualism or pat Sunday School answers. We're going to have to get real about the true treasures of our hearts, share openly with safe and trusted believers, and pray with and for each other. We must step out in faith, say

goodbye to some idols that have ruled us for entirely too long, and embrace what the Lord promises to bring in their stead.

When God led me through an intense season of dethroning the idols of my heart, it was the hardest and sweetest time of my life. Hard, because of what I had to let go of. Sweet, because I began to reclaim my first love for Jesus. More than a decade later, I can testify to you that no pursuit in my life has been worth more than the unrivaled pursuit of Christ. It's why I had to come back and present this study to you anew. I don't want you to miss Him for anything in the world.



DAY ONE

DEFINING OUR TERMS

EXODUS 20:3: You shall have no other gods before me (NIV).

As I approach this topic ten years after first writing about what it means to know and serve the one true God, I do so bearing more experience. When God awakened me to the reality of modern-day idolatry all those years ago, all I could see at the time was the choice set before me: continue to fall at the feet of the false gods I was living for or renounce them for the promise of living more fully for Jesus Christ.

Mind you, the choice was clear but not simple. It was fraught with moments of confusion and complex ramifications. Yes, I knew what I needed to do, but leaving behind the comforts of what was familiar and satisfyingly unsatisfying was terrifying. And following Jesus down a path of obedience that felt so narrow there was little room for extras seemed a lonely proposition.

At the time, I knew what obedience meant, but I didn't know what it would yield. The first writing of *No Other Gods* was about identifying and walking away from the idols that hold us captive so that we can make room for God. This revision maintains that theme but also sheds light on what's on the other side—the unrivaled fullness and blessing that accompanies Christ being the absolute Lord of our lives.

We'll learn what committing to the narrow path of obedience looks like—and how to stay there—so that when the path breaks into wide-open glades of blessing and beauty we're around to experience it. We'll do the hard work of cutting ourselves loose from our modern-day obsessions so we can abide in the Vine, bearing abundant fruit that will matter into eternity. We'll discover the adventure and fulfillment of having an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ that absolutely nothing on earth can begin to compete with.

We'll discover the adventure and fulfillment of having an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

As you begin this personal journey, know that we'll spend much of our time studying the Israelites at different points in their history since they were quite experienced with false gods of all kinds. Metal or wooden, large or small, religious enough to sit in a sanctuary, homey enough to fit in a living

room, a golden cow here, a planet there—if a false god was to be had the Israelites found it or forged it. I wish I could say we don't have the same tendencies today, but the truth is, we do—in spades. Our objects of worship just look a little different.

Besides the Israelites having a history with idols there's another reason they'll fill the bulk of our study.

Don't become idolaters as some of them were.

1 Corinthians 10:7a

BEGIN TODAY'S STUDY BY READING 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13.

List the reasons Paul says "these things" took place, according to verses 6 and 11?

What specific instruction is given at the top of verse 7?

I don't know if you have a background similar to mine, but I grew up in the church. I was in and out of gatherings like youth group, worship services, and prayer meetings my whole life. I even went to a Christian school. Words like *idols*, *false gods*, and *graven images* were well-known to me. While I'm deeply grateful for what I learned in those settings, overexposure to certain words and phrases can sometimes be detrimental. Over time, these familiar concepts can lose their meaning either through repetition or because they become too connected with things like legalistic teachers or some really odd people.

Terms like *false gods* or *idols* may fall into this category of overfamiliarity for you. Or maybe the opposite is true—you've scarcely been exposed to those words, so instead of sounding churchy and rote, they may sound off-putting and strange. Either way, my hope is that we'll find fresh meaning for old words and possibly new words for old meanings.

Considering our varied backgrounds and the possible connotations that go along with certain words like *false gods*, let's begin by defining our terms. Ponder this definition by Ken Sande:

Most of us think of an idol as a statue of wood, stone, or metal worshiped by pagan people. ... In biblical terms, it is something other than God that we *set our heart on* (Luke 12:29; 1 Cor. 10:19), that motivates us (1 Cor. 4:5), that masters and rules us (Ps. 119:133; Eph. 5:5), or that we trust, fear, or serve (Isa. 42:17; Matt 6:24; Luke 12:4-5). ... An idol can also be referred to as a "false god" or a "functional god."¹

PERSONAL REFLECTION: What new thoughts does this definition bring to your understanding of a false god or idol?

When I consider what I set my heart on, what motivates me in life, what controls me, and what I serve with my energy and resources, suddenly I am far from graven images and toe-to-toe with my lust for attention, my attachment to comfort, and my demand for people to meet my needs. These are just hints of what I often look to as my personal saviors.

Look back at the definition and notice the term *functional god*. I especially like the use of this phrase because sometimes it's easier to identify a false god when we see it as something that's functioning for us on a regular basis. Also, I particularly appreciate it because it puts an Old Testament concept in a current light. More on this to come.

PERSONAL TAKE: Explain the difference between a professed god and a functional god.

I put it this way: A professed god is who or what we say is our god; a functional god is who or what actually operates as our god.

In the margin, list some examples of functional gods in our society.

Take a look at another definition, this one from Richard Keyes:

An idol is something within creation that is inflated to function as God. All sorts of things are potential idols, depending only on our attitudes and actions toward them ... Idolatry may not involve explicit denials of God's existence or character. It may well come in the form of an over-attachment to something that is, in itself, perfectly good ... An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero—anything that can substitute for God.²

Keyes's definition is profound because he goes beyond merely focusing on our affinities for what is patently sinful. He insightfully points out that it's possible to make gods out of people or things that are in themselves "perfectly good."

John Calvin builds on this concept in another way, "The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much."³

I just got uncomfortable—anyone else? While I've certainly desired what is blatantly wrong, Calvin's definition is more characteristic of my struggles with false gods.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Write about something in your life that is good in and of itself but has become detrimental simply because you desire it too much.



Now that we've defined our terms, we'll look at the first time God addressed idolatry in the Old Testament.

READ EXODUS 20:1-6.

What is the first command given in these verses?

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Why is it significant that this is the first of the Ten Commandments? In other words, how do the other nine commandments rest upon this one?

I think the other nine commandments are irrelevant to us if we neglect the first one. If God is not the God of our lives, the rest of His commandments become mere suggestions. If your exposure to the Ten Commandments began with verse 3, like mine did, you've missed the beautiful introduction found in verses 1-2. The rest of our study will flow from these truths.

SLOWLY READ VERSES 1-2 AND DESCRIBE THE FOLLOWING:

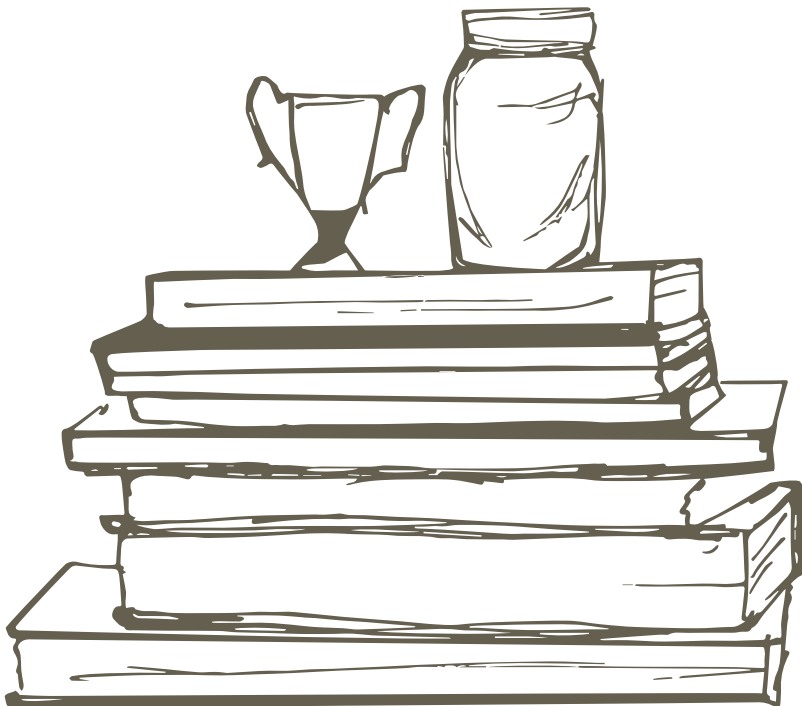
Who does God say He is to the Israelites?

What does He say He's done for them?

PERSONAL REFLECTION: How do God's personal relationship with the Israelites and His rescue of them enlighten your perspective on why the first commandment is not to have any gods before God?

If I've learned anything about false gods over the years it's that they're incapable of satisfying our deepest longings while mercilessly holding us captive. Let me put it to you straight, your idols don't like you. On the other hand, in Exodus 20:2, God declared His deep relationship with His people while also recounting His rescue of them. This personal, pursuing, and liberating love of God will be the power by which we'll demolish the idols of our hearts as we move forward. Nothing but His love will be strong enough for the task ahead.

*Nothing but His love
will be strong enough
for the task ahead.*



DAY TWO

IDENTIFYING OUR IDOLS

2 KINGS 17:41a: They feared the LORD but also served their idols.

Yesterday we discussed the nature of false gods in modern terminology. Hopefully you already have a better idea of how you've been substituting certain functional gods for God in your life, even allowing them to entangle you. Perhaps you're aware of how you've exalted something to a position it was never meant to hold. It may be a person, career, dream, pleasure, or obsession.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: We're still early in our study, but what false gods can you identify in your life so far?

Before I began writing this study the first time around, I struggled to make sense of why general misery had set in like an unhurried front in my life. Why did anxiety feel more the norm than peace? Where was the power of the Christian life I'd learned so much about while growing up in a Christian home? Why were my relationships so tumultuous? I was supposed to have contentment, but within me churned a perpetual desire for what I couldn't possess. I liked the idea of Christ being my satisfaction, but the promise of worldly success and a satisfying human relationship seemed a much more convincing ticket to happiness. I absolutely knew Christ as my Savior, was involved in my church, and remained a fairly knowledgeable Bible student. Why wasn't my life working?

I briefly shared about this part of my testimony in the opening video along with a passage of Scripture from 2 Kings 17 that yielded the beginning of my answer. I was reading through 2 Kings as part of a one-year Bible plan. These kinds of reading plans can be helpful, because, let's just be honest, when trying to fix your life no one thinks, *let's head to 2 Kings*. Yet as God would have it, this study would grow out of that passage.

In 2 Kings 17, we find the Israelites many years removed from the command God had given them to not have any gods before Him (Ex. 20:3). For years

and years the Israelites had yanked on the rope of God's patience and compassion until He finally let His end go. And the rope flew. As a result of their rebellion, the King of Assyria besieged the Israelites who were living in Samaria and deported them to pagan cities under his control. He then took his people from their cities and settled them in Samaria. It was a double exile, if you will: God's chosen people deported to pagan cities, Assyria's pagan people deported to God's city.

READ 2 KINGS 17:6-17. *Look for references to idolatry.*

List the many reasons this tragedy happened, according to this passage. You'll notice the depth of Israel's idolatry as you list each one.

READ VERSES 12-13 AGAIN.

How do we know this punishment hadn't come out of nowhere and could have been avoided?

PERSONAL REFLECTION: From your list of reasons why the tragedy occurred, what image or specific form of idolatry reminds you of an idolatrous temptation that the church is currently facing? Explain.

This next part of Scripture about the Assyrians resettling in Israel's Samaria changed my life.

READ 2 KINGS 17:24-41.

Complete each pairing from its corresponding verse:

- Verse 32: They feared/worshiped the LORD, but they ...*

❑ Verse 33: *They feared/worshiped the LORD, but they ...*

❑ v. 41: *They feared/worshiped the LORD, but they ...*

They worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods.

2 Kings 17:33, NIV

Verse 33 deeply convicted me all those years ago. “They worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods” (NIV). Verse 41 further compounds the description, “Even while these people were worshiping the LORD, they were serving their idols” (NIV). The people were living split lives, attempting to worship both God and gods. Worshiping the One, while serving the others.

Both verses speak of worship to God but service to idols. For much of my life I worshiped God: singing hymns, reading my Bible, and confessing my belief in Him. Yet, if you could have witnessed what controlled me and what consumed my time, you would have seen that, in many cases, it was my idols. Not carved images but people, career paths, materialism, acceptance, and more. **God (on some level) was getting my worship, but my gods were getting my service.**

Of course this doesn’t really work, as evidenced by verse 34. This dual worship lulls us into thinking that we’ve still got God on the line because we love Jesus and all. However, in reality our hearts, service, time, trust, and resources are being brought to the feet of something or someone else. Could it be that we’re serving our own gods, though we sit on the front row at church and serve coffee in the fellowship hall and lead the mission trips? Do we claim the Bible as our source of truth while our most trusted advisors come from movie screens and social media feeds? **Perhaps so many of our struggles—lack of freedom, loss of spiritual desire, slavery to image, perfectionism, confusion, insatiable lusts—have much to do with our futile attempt to serve both God and gods.**

PERSONAL REFLECTION: In what areas do you find yourself pulled between worshiping God and serving false gods?

WE’LL END WITH GOD’S PERSONAL PLEA TO HIS PEOPLE BY READING 2 KINGS 17:35-36 AGAIN.



In reference to the false gods of the surrounding nations, the Lord said, "Do not ..." and then gave four prohibited actions. What were they?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

PERSONAL TAKE: How does each of these actions progressively build on the one before?

One of my greatest struggles with idolatry has been putting people in the place of God. Placing those on a pedestal who we think will make life work for us (worship) can lead to a dysfunctional deferring to them in a way only reserved for God (bowing down). This may then lead to our energy being spent on those we've idolized (service), and ultimately to us giving away the dearest parts of ourselves, whether it be our hearts, resources, time, or bodies (sacrifice).

PERSONAL RESPONSE: How do you see this progression unfolding in your struggle with a particular false god? What steps can you take to reverse it?

I believe this divided living is one of the reasons so many of us are stuck. Basically, we've pushed God to the edges. We claim Him as our Savior but we've spared Him little room in our hearts. Our most treasured spaces are occupied by our false gods, and we wonder why God isn't showing Himself strong on our behalf.

This isn't the way it has to be. This wasn't the way it had to be for the Israelites. There's a superior way, and it comes straight from the Lord's mouth. Ponder these words as we close our study together. "Instead, fear the LORD, who brought you up from the land of Egypt with great power and an outstretched arm. You are to bow down to him, and you are to sacrifice to him" (2 Kings 17:36).



PERSONAL RESPONSE: In the space provided, detail the ways you can worship the Lord in each of the corresponding areas.

AREA	WAYS TO WORSHIP
<i>Worship/Fearing</i>	
<i>Bow in worship</i>	
<i>Serving</i>	
<i>Sacrificing</i>	

Absolutely nothing on earth is worth forsaking the life for which the Lord has set you free.

I know firsthand how difficult and costly this work can be, but nothing will prove more rewarding. As I reflect over the past decade, I do not regret one moment of battle. The one true God set me free from idols that, to this day, I'm no longer a slave of. Absolutely nothing on earth is worth forsaking the life for which the Lord has set you free. I'm cheering you on as you do the work over these next seven weeks together. I promise it's worth everything you've got.

DAY THREE

WHAT HOLDS POWER OVER YOU?

EXODUS 2:25: So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (NIV).

As I reflect on this week's topic, I will remember the paralyzing feeling of being under the power of someone or something at different times in my life. Lack of inward freedom is one of the most agonizing experiences of human existence, one I was well acquainted with for an interminable season. However, through the many bouts of weakness and powerlessness, I came to discover the delivering presence of Jesus. He has brought me the freedom that seemed totally unimaginable at the time. It's the same freedom He wants to bring you.

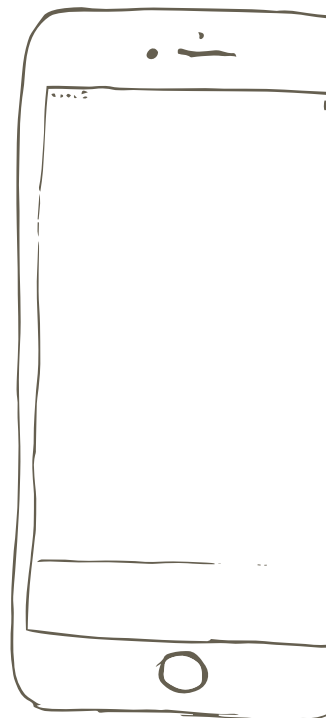
According to the definitions from Day One, what is a false god? Write the answer in your own words. Glance back if necessary.

Yesterday I shared how 2 Kings 17 impacted me when I discovered I'd been trying to live for both God and my cherished false gods at the same time. This was as successful as dieting on Sour Patch Kids®, by the way. The Israelites' exile into Assyrian captivity was especially tragic because God had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt earlier in their history. He'd set them free so they could worship and serve Him, not for them to return to captivity. But isn't this what we're so prone to do?

REFRESH YOUR MEMORY FROM YESTERDAY BY READING 2 KINGS 17:7 AND FILLING IN THE BLANK.

"This disaster happened because the people of Israel sinned against the LORD their God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt from the _____ of Pharaoh king of Egypt and because they worshiped other gods."

I've felt under the power (hand) of many things in my life. It's been as simple as not being able to pass up another cookie—or seven—after dinner or as consuming as jealousy. Long before the exile we read about yesterday in 2 Kings, the Israelites were under the controlling force of oppressive Pharaohs. In our particular culture, we might find ourselves ruled by alcohol,



Netflix® binges, an unhealthy relationship, unforgiveness, materialism, or sexual addiction. As we learned on Day One, we can also be in bondage to something inherently good that has turned harmful by virtue of how much it consumes us.

As we consider the modern-day idols that hold power over us, today we'll read about one of those Pharaohs who oppressed Israel. Prior to his opposition, the Israelites had flourished in Egypt under the favor of Joseph's influence. But when this new Pharaoh came into power, one who didn't know Joseph, he persecuted the Israelites because he was threatened by their growth.

READ EXODUS 1:1-22; 2:23.

Cite the specific ways Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites.

We live in a world where proud and ruthless rulers still oppress the poor and powerless. Every year I visit a country in Eastern Europe where this kind of oppression is a normal way of life for its people. While unjust leaders still oppress people today, many of us in Western society deal more with pharaohs of the heart. While God delivered Israel from under the power of a physical ruler, the truths of this story apply to the modern-day idols that rule us internally. I can relate to the Israelites' story for many reasons but chief among them has been the discovery that only the hand of the Lord was (and is) strong enough to rescue me. This I'm clear on.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Reflect on what currently holds power over you. Write down who or what is a pharaoh in your life.

Only the hand of the Lord was and is strong enough to rescue me.

Why does this person or thing hold power over you?

READ EXODUS 2:23-25.

What did the Israelites do as a result of their suffering?

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Write about a time when you felt absolutely powerless in a situation and all you could do was cry out to God.

List the four ways God responded to the Israelites' cries for help (vv. 24-25).

God _____ their groaning;

God _____ His covenant;

God _____ the Israelites;

God _____.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Which of God's responses to the Israelites in Exodus 2 means the most to you and why?

When the author of Exodus said that God remembered His covenant, he wasn't implying that God had somehow forgotten the terms of it during the past 430 years while the Israelites were in Egypt, but then suddenly realized He needed to be faithful to His word. The term *remember* in the Old Testament is often associated with God acting at a certain time. It has to do with God determining when it's time to move rather than His recollection of something. Because of God's covenant with Abraham, which would continue to be renewed in every generation, God was about to free the Israelites through a man named Moses.

READ ABOUT GOD'S CALL TO MOSES IN EXODUS 3:1-12.

The Israelites couldn't keep up with the abusive workload. Their baby boys had been executed. They'd been stripped of their freedom. They could do nothing but cry out to God in the midst of their despair. While I've never experienced what the Israelites endured as captives in Egypt, I've known utter powerlessness against debilitating fears, terrifying depression, and idols I've put my hope in that left me bitterly disappointed. I've also walked alongside friends and loved ones in unexplainable circumstances beyond their ability to endure, some of those circumstances which can only be described by the word *oppressive*.

Earlier in today's study you named a false god in your life that's currently holding power over you and why. In a moment I'm going to ask you to describe the ways you've allowed the false God to oppress you. Before we get there though, here's a personal example to stimulate your thinking.

After moving to Nashville in my twenties, I was consumed by the success—or lack thereof—of my music career. My happiness rose and fell on how many records I sold and whether or not the record company believed in me. I missed opportunities to relax and enjoy other aspects of life while trying to control my career. The deceiving element was that the more I tried to control

it, the more it controlled me. My satisfaction and identity were wrapped up in whether or not people considered me a success. This was oppressive because it dictated my time, peace, happiness, and where I directed my energies. My career held all the power. I even missed a monumental family gathering for work, a decision I now regret. Achievement was controlling me, resulting in anxiety, self-centeredness, and general discontentment. A good thing had become a god.

Your turn:



The false gods we serve hinder and wound us in many ways, and oftentimes the wounding begins with the power they hold over us—or the power we give them. But we'll get to that later.

Only one Person can do something about the bondage you're in. Only One is able to rescue you. As I write these words I have such hope for you, knowing that the same One who is able to deliver is also the One who hears our cries for help, remembers His everlasting covenant with us, sees our pain, and enters in (Ex. 2:24-25). D. K. Stuart puts it this way, "The exodus did not come about simply because people were in trouble; it was the result of a prayer of lament for rescue to the *only one who could actually do something about it*"⁴ (emphasis mine).

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Are you still relying on yourself to conquer what holds power over you? If so, explain.

If you're at the point where you know you're powerless and desire to rely on God, write it in a prayer.

Being free from our idols begins by recognizing our powerlessness against them. Apart from the power of Christ, we're unable to loose ourselves from their hold. Here's the good news: He's eager to set you free.

DAY FOUR

THE IDOLS WE CREATE

ISAIAH 44:20: Is not this thing in my right hand a lie? (NIV).

The only thing worse than being under the control of something through no fault of my own is being under the control of something I've actually created. It's pain with extra sides of guilt and regret.

Look back at 2 Kings 17:7 and Exodus 1:8-11 from Days Two and Three respectively. In both scenarios the Israelites were in captivity, but only one situation came as a result of their disobedience. Circle the reference that describes that situation.

The Israelites' captivity in Exodus 1 does not appear to be a result of God's punishment, nor is disobedience mentioned. However, the 2 Kings passage paints a different picture. What I'm getting at is that **sometimes we find ourselves under the power of something we didn't set out looking for; other times we bring bondage upon ourselves by creating false gods with our own hands.** Either way, God desires to set us free.

Today we'll look at a passage in Isaiah that describes a scenario of being under the power of something we've created ourselves. At first glance, this passage may seem absurd to modern readers, but it's more relevant to our day than we may think.

READ ISAIAH 44:6-20.

What types of workers made these idols (vv. 11-13)?

Choose the word that best describes these men:

Tough

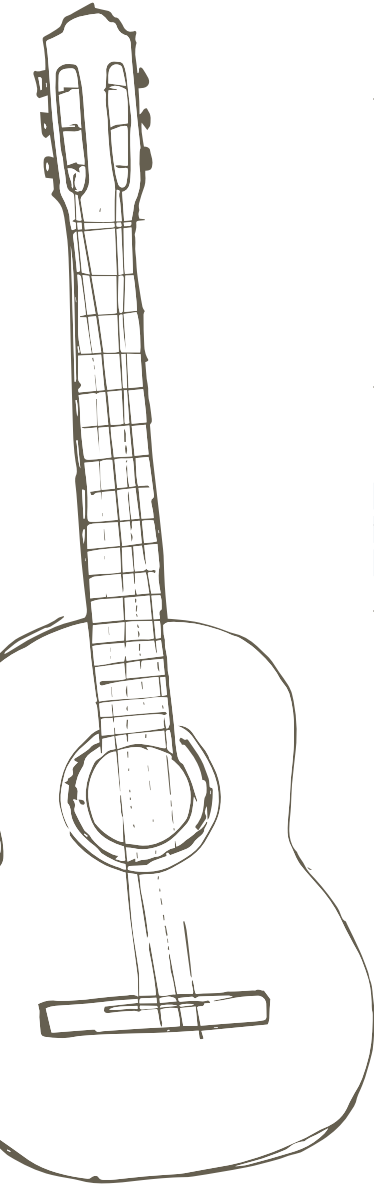
Skilled

Smart

Educated

According to verses 9-10, who benefitted from the false gods the workers fashioned?

The workmen who crafted these false gods were skilled professionals who used specific resources to make them, not the least of which was their own strength.



Being talented, skilled, and resourced are blessings we should be intent on cultivating for Christ and His church. The temptation we must resist, however, is using those blessings to create false gods that end up captivating our hearts.

Hold your place in Isaiah 44 and look up 1 Corinthians 10:31. This verse serves as a litmus test for determining how our talents and skills are being used. Regardless of what we do, what should always be our motivation?

PERSONAL RESPONSE: With 1 Corinthians 10:31 in mind, list a few of your skills, talents, resources, or areas of expertise. How can you use these for the glory of God?

SKILLS	HOW THEY GLORIFY GOD

I wonder how our lives would change if we regularly asked ourselves the question, *Am I using my gifts for God's glory or for my own glory, pride, comfort, happiness, or other selfish motive?*

Return to Isaiah 44. Perhaps you had some of the same questions I did: How could anyone think that a god could come from something made with human hands? What power does a lifeless statue of a person set in a temple have? How could the same piece of lumber that's used for firewood also be revered as something that could save? We can clearly see the senseless nature of it all. And yet we'll be surprised over the next few weeks at how often we too look to lifeless things to fulfill us. Before we get there, it's helpful to determine why these skilled workmen—and the worshipers of their idols—had become so deluded.

Am I using my gifts for God's glory or for my own glory, pride, comfort, or happiness?

According to Isaiah 44:18-20, how did the craftsmen arrive at the conclusion that the idols they'd created could save them?

One of the overarching points the Lord is making about a craftsman who thinks he can create a divine being out of earthen material is simply this: It doesn't make any sense! How can the other half of a log you burned in the fire to warm yourself be a savior? How can that same firewood you used to bake bread also be something you worship? The creators of these false gods—and the worshipers of them—had lost their logic and reason.

They'd arrived at this thinking over time, because their _____ hearts/minds had led them astray (v. 20).

We can all look back at certain times and wonder, *what was I thinking? Where was my common sense? Why couldn't I see the lie in my right hand (Is. 44:20)?* We can almost always point back to being misled by our deceived minds (or deluded hearts).

Deception is often logic based on a faulty premise.

Being deceived is like following an exquisitely crafted compass that has faulty inner workings. We walk in the direction of its misleading arrow, convincing ourselves that our choices are leading us true north. Meanwhile, we're headed deeper and deeper into the woods. We point to our compass—*look, I'm only following the arrow.* But **deception is often logic based on a faulty premise.**

I'll never be able to read this passage without thinking of a time in my life when I'd allowed myself to be deceived. I'd made a false god out of a person, and I compromised obedience to Jesus for a friendship. I kept trying to mold the truth to fit my desires. In the strangest way, I fully knew my error, but yet had simultaneously convinced myself I was as right as I'd ever been.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Have you ever been so deceived that you found yourself doing something that made absolutely no sense? If so, briefly describe that situation.

The reason I asked you to recount this time in your life is not to bring you back to a low point—we don't need more lows for lows' sakes. Rather, I hope that by recognizing how you were deceived by a false god, what led up to it, and what made you susceptible to its draw, will better equip you to identify deception in the future.

The worshipers in Isaiah 44 bowed down to their false gods for salvation, help in troubled times, fulfillment, protection from enemies, and provision in lean circumstances. While the objects of their worship were different from the false gods we look to today, the reasons why they worshiped them were in many ways the same.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Who or what are you putting your hope in to rescue, save, or fulfill you? What are you counting on this object or person to provide?

We know the inside of the compass is broken—however beautiful the outside might be—if its arrow is pointing in a direction different than what is revealed to us in Scripture. We tend to think of deception as something that leads us in the exact opposite direction of God’s Word, but oftentimes it’s just a few degrees to the left or right. If we let our wayward desires lead, we’ll eventually find ourselves miles from where we should be.

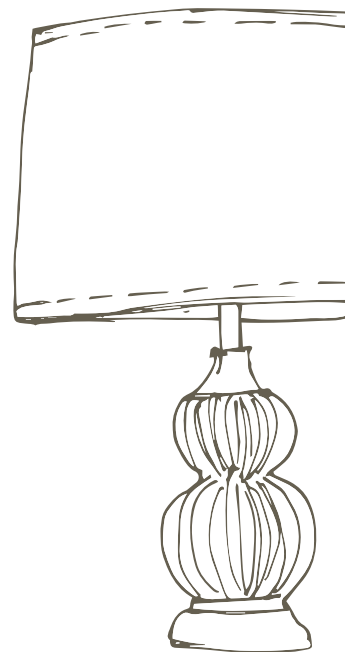
PERSONAL RESPONSE: Ask the Lord to show you if you’re being deceived, or if there’s a lie in your right hand. Confess whatever He reveals to you in the space below.

Recognizing our false gods will do us little good if we fail to turn from them to the one true God. Finish today’s chapter by reading about the God who is above all gods in Isaiah 44:21-23.

PERSONAL RESPONSE: From these verses, what about God’s character and deeds mean the most to you and why?

I’m moved by the fact that God “formed” (made) us (v. 21), as opposed to us making Him. The deluded idol-makers worshiped what they’d formed with their own hands, but we worship the One whose hands formed us. Let’s acknowledge before our Creator that we are His servants and He is our Redeemer. It’s not too late to return to Him (v. 22).

I formed you,
you are my servant;
Israel, you will never
be forgotten by me.
Isaiah 44:21b



DAY FIVE

FINDING OUR TREASURE

MATTHEW 6:21: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Let me begin by congratulating you on finishing your first week of homework. I'll admit this study is nothing if not invasive. I can testify that the most difficult seasons of my life were when God came for more of my heart and therefore my false gods. But I wouldn't trade one moment of His loving hand of discipline in my life. The freedom and blessings that resulted have been beyond compare. Hebrews 12:11 reminds us that no discipline is pleasant at the time, but painful. Afterward, however, it yields a harvest of righteousness. I do love a harvest.

READ PROVERBS 4:20-23.

What does verse 23 tell us to do and why?

God gave us these instructions because He created the heart to be the wellspring of life. It's the most central part of our being. It guides, feels, receives, hurts, heals, dreams, connects, loves. So it's not surprising that the most difficult false gods to conquer in our lives are the ones to which we've attached our hearts. The idols that have been the most difficult to root out of my life by far are the ones that have woven themselves into my heart. Jesus spoke about this specifically in the Gospel of Matthew.

READ MATTHEW 6:19-24.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Why are our hearts and treasure so intimately connected? Take some time to think this through, and write about it in the space provided.

Jesus commanded us to store our treasure in heaven rather than on earth. All our earthly possessions are in a state of breaking down. They're temporal, not even safe from things like moths and rust. Whereas anything we do for Christ will last for eternity and is being stored for us in heaven where no one and nothing can get to it.

I remember visiting dear friends of my parents who are missionaries in Milan, Italy. Joan and her husband Sam left a successful gold business he'd started in the States for the opportunity to plant a church in Milan. I was sitting in their living room, no doubt with an espresso in hand, when Joan mentioned that they'd been robbed twenty-six times over the forty years of serving there. "I don't have one valuable piece of jewelry left," she said with the most gracious laugh. "There's really nothing left to take!"

Joan never denied the pain of losing such meaningful possessions, nor did she offer spiritual platitudes. The plain reality is that the treasures she has stored in heaven include the hundreds, maybe thousands, of Italians who have come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior because of her witness. These Italians are some of her dearest friends. No thief can snatch those treasures from her the way her earthly ones were stolen.

Neither money nor possessions have moral value in and of themselves. They're neither holy nor evil. The issue is where our hearts are in relationship to them. **If our possessions, houses, clothes, cars, and money are our most valuable treasures then they also have our heart's devotion. And if our hearts are devoted to what we have and own, then our treasures become our gods.** As Jesus explained, you can't serve both God and your stuff.

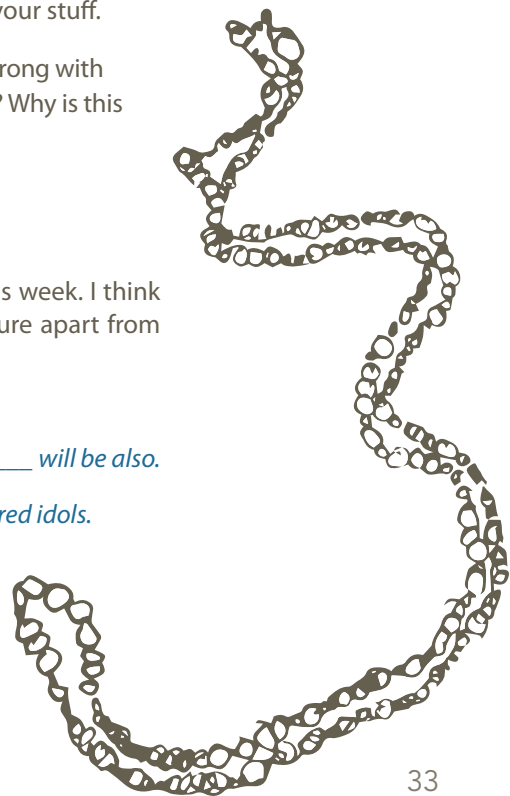
PERSONAL REFLECTION: According to verse 24, what's wrong with straddling the fence trying to serve both God and our money? Why is this impossible?

Revisit Ken Sande's definition of an idol from Day One of this week. I think we can sum up his definition by saying that what we treasure apart from God is where we'll find our idols.

Fill in the blank from Matthew 6:21. For where your _____ is, there your _____ will be also.

Turn back to Isaiah 44:9. Describe the value of these treasured idols.

What we treasure apart from God is where we'll find our idols.



READ 2 KINGS 17:15.

Circle the answer that best completes the following sentence. We become like what we:

Follow

Reject

Wish for

As we build on some key verses from this week we come to the following revelations:

- **MATTHEW 6:21:** What we treasure is where our heart is.
- **ISAIAH 44:9:** If we treasure idols, we treasure what is worthless (benefits no one).
- **2 KINGS 17:15:** We become like what we follow.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: When you consider your life, which of the phrases above best relates to the current state of your heart and why?

*If God is our treasure,
our hearts will be
devoted to Him.*

The bright side of evaluating the treasures of our hearts is that it's the first step in rooting out what's worthless to make room for the One who surpasses our deepest longings and desires.

If God is our treasure, our hearts will be devoted to Him. If we treasure Him, we're treasuring what is of infinite value. If we follow Him, we will become like Him.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 3:18.

As I think of being transformed into His likeness, I'm reminded of the positive meaning of becoming like what we worship.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Ponder the ways you practically follow, and therefore worship, the Lord and how these ways have molded you into His image.

You've done a lot of heart work this week. You've studied what false gods look like in our modern culture, realizing you may deal with more idolatry than you initially thought. You dug into 2 Kings 17 and were made aware of how easy it is to say you love God while living for lots of other things. You spent some time with the Israelites in the Book of Exodus, remembering the bondage they endured under the reign of Pharaoh and how the one true God set them free. You then turned to Isaiah 44 and discovered that some of the worst gods we find ourselves in bondage to are often the ones we've created ourselves. In other words, you've had a light-hearted skip through the Old Testament confronting your modern-day idolatry, in case you were wondering how to categorize your experience.

In all seriousness, this is where freedom begins. As you root out the idols of your heart you'll be making room for God to dwell. For the sake of emphasis, write the words *make room* in the margin. This phrase will serve as our two-word reminder of what we hope to accomplish over these eight weeks together. Nothing, and I do mean nothing, will rival who God will be to you and what He will do for you when you make Him the treasure of your heart.

SESSION TWO VIEWER GUIDE

FREE TO WORSHIP

GROUP DISCUSSION

What one thing from this video teaching really resonated with you? Why?

How does the phrase *functional god* help you think differently about the prevalence of false gods in your life? How are functional gods affecting you?

According to Kelly's teaching from Exodus, why does God long for us to be free from our false gods?

Kelly said, "We can only worship God to the degree that we are free." What did she mean?

Are you living your life unencumbered for God and His purposes? If so, how? If not, why not?

Have you ever tried to bring your worship into Egypt or Egypt into your worship? Explain.

Video sessions available for purchase or rent at LIFEWAY.COM/NOOTHERGODS

Cilantro Black Beans and Rice (serves 6-8)

INGREDIENTS:

- 4 (15-ounce) cans of black beans
- 2 cups whole grain brown rice
- ½ yellow onion
- 1 bunch fresh cilantro
- 6 garlic cloves
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 12 ounces shredded Monterey Jack cheese, divided
- 2 avocados, sliced
- 1 jar salsa
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 bag tortilla chips

I don't know what it is about this recipe that gives you all the joy of comfort food while still being mostly healthy. And if you want to go from mostly healthy to totally healthy, you can hold the cheese, sour cream, and chips. But then you lose the fun! I say go comfort food and mostly healthy, and then feel really good about the whole meal. You will love this dish and come back to it again and again.

DIRECTIONS

Preheat your oven to 325 degrees.

Heat black beans in a saucepan over medium-high heat, keeping most of the juice from the cans. In a separate pot, prepare rice according to package instructions, and set aside. Chop onion and cilantro. Mince garlic. Warm olive oil in a sauté pan over medium heat, approximately 1 minute. Sauté onion, cilantro, and garlic in oil. Allow beans to warm for 20 minutes, then stir the onion mixture into the black beans.

Pour black bean concoction into a 13x9-inch pan, and top with 8 ounces of shredded cheese, covering extensively. Cover with aluminum foil, and bake for 30 minutes.

Serve black bean entrée over rice alongside a nice spread of avocado slices, salsa, sour cream, tortilla chips, and the remaining shredded cheese for a beautiful presentation.

