

Extra credit right here. A little long class, kidding. For those who just came from class with me to chapel, I appreciate that. Double dose. Let's open our Bibles to Isaiah 46. Isaiah 46, 13 verses. I want us, in the time we have this morning, to consider all of them. I'll read the text and then ask the Lord to illumine our hearts to give us understanding.

Isaiah 46, this is the inspired and the authoritative word of God, so let's pay careful attention to it.

"Bel has bowed down, Nebo stoops over. Their images are consigned to the beast and the cattle. The things that you carry are burdensome. A load for the weary beast. They stooped over, they have bowed down together, they could not rescue the burden, they have themselves gone into captivity. Listen to me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel. You who have been born by me from birth and have been carried from the womb, even to your old age, I shall be the same, and even to your graying years, I shall bear you. I have done it and shall carry you, and I shall bear you and shall deliver you. To whom would you liken me and make me equal and compare me that we should be alike. Those who lavish gold from the purse and weigh silver on the scale, hire a goldsmith and he makes it into a god. They bow down, indeed, they worship it. They lift it upon the and carry it. They set it in its place, and it stands there. It does not move from its place. The one may cry to it. It cannot answer. It cannot deliver from his distress. Remember this, and be assured. Recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times, things which have not been done, saying, My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all my good pleasure. ' Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my purpose from a far country. Truly, I have spoken. Truly, I will bring it to pass. I have planned it. Surely, I will do it. Listen to me, you stubborn-minded who are far from righteousness. I bring near my righteousness, it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay, and I will grant salvation in Zion and my glory for Israel.

Let's pray. God, we do confess that you are the God who carries us from the cradle to the grave and even beyond the grave to heaven itself. Lord, as we look into these words today, we pray that you would convict our hearts where we need conviction, that you would build up our hearts and edify us where we need edification, that our hearts would even rely more completely upon you, even as we consider your word. Lord, may these not be the words of mere men, but the very words of God taught to us by your Holy spirit. So illumine us now, we pray for our good and for your glory. We ask it in Christ's powerful name. Amen.

Anything that we worship and in which we ultimately hope, other than the one true God, will be a burden to us and will ultimately leave us disappointed. Those sources of comfort and purpose around which we build our lives, ironically, are both weightless and empty on the one hand, and then on the other, an unbearable burden.

And I want to submit that while that seems ironic, it's because they're weightless and we expect them to carry our weight that we end up carrying their weight. I know that's a lot, but I'll unpack that. This is vividly clear when we think of idolatry in the literal sense, an object that you make with your hands that then you have to carry around with you from place to place that you have to care for, that you have to build a shelter for, that you have to provide for. You make it, you call it your provider, but it turns out that you're the one doing all the providing. The idolater does more for his idol than his idol does for him. In fact, for him, his idol does nothing but drag him down while he serves it, expecting him it to lift him up. Moreover, since idol's are creatures, our own handiwork, either of our hands or when we make idols out of nature, the works of God's hands, they're necessarily mutable and destructible. That is to say, the idols are from nothing and may one day return to their exact from nothing. Psalm 33: 17 says that "a horse is a false hope for victory."

In other words, a created, a good thing, certainly something that can be deployed in war. But if you're ultimately hoping in the means and in the instruments and not the one who makes the provision, you may very well live to be disappointed. In our modern Western cultures, we seldom fashion idols in the old fashioned way of building objects with our hands to worship them, though that certainly goes on in parts of the world today. Yet the sin of idolatry is flourishing as much now as ever. I think we should not flatter ourselves that we somehow have gotten beyond the benighted age of idolatry. We still live

in the benighted age of idolatry, the age where we foolishly place our hopes and our ultimate ambitions in things which cannot assure us of those hopes and ambitions. Idolatry, now, as always, is primarily a matter of the heart. It's not so much the issue of, is there an object in the corner of your room that you fall down to, as much as, is there some good other than God that commands the obedience and the devotion of your heart and in which you find your worth and your validation.

If that's what your heart is like, then idolatry is, sadly, alive and well. Listen to this from the Old Testament, Ezekiel Chapter 14, verses 3 and 4. Son of Man, that's what he calls Ezekiel. "Son of man, these men have set up their idol," listen to this carefully, "in their hearts." In other words, this idea of heart idolatry is not just a New Testament or modern notion. Heart idolatry was always a problem, even when it was real material idolatry. It was always the problem of the heart. "These men have set up idols in their hearts, and they have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all? Therefore speak to them and tell them. Thus says the Lord God, any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idol," listen again, "in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet And then comes to the prophet, I, the Lord, will be brought to him, I will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of the idol in order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from me through their idol."

So if you worship an idol, and you say, God help us, he's going to confront that because we cannot serve God and man, we cannot serve God and idol. Idolatry, he says here, is estrangement from God. It weans your heart off of devotion and reliance on God, and it causes you to substitute some good or power in his place. Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, speaking about money, No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God in wealth, he says. Now, we can amplify that and say this is really the choice of your heart, and it's the choice right now, as always. Do you ultimately order your life to the glory and the enjoyment of God, also known as your chief end? Or do you hope for and order your life to some other perceived good, either something evil that you have made or something good that should never have been worshiped? Either way, we fall short of our own chief end and happiness. I want to consider four things.

I know we only have 20 or 25 minutes, and I still have a four-part plan for the text in front of us. First, I want to consider the false gods we carry, verses 1 and 2, and then also 6 and 7. Second, I want to consider the God who carries us, verses 3 to 5. Third, the God whose counsel carries all of history, verses 8 to 11. Finally, the God who carries salvation to us. This whole theme of carrying and bringing actually runs through the entirety of the chapter. First, let's consider the false gods we carry. Verses one and two, Isaiah begins by prophesying the downfall of Babylon, and he speaks of two gods, Bel and Nebo, also called in the older literature Marduk and Nebo, the son of Marduk. In fact, there are Chaldean kings named after these gods. Belshazzar is named after Bel. Nebuchadnezzar is named after his son Nebo or Nebo. And he says in verse one, "Bel has bowed down, Nebo stoops over." He's talking about the crumbling of the Chaldean pantheon. These were the gods that were supposed to protect the Chaldeans, and they're going down. He's prophesying here about the invasion of the Medes and the Persians.

Their images are consigned to beast and cattle. And what he means by that is that the idols are coming down and they're literally going to be thrown on the back of carts, pulled around and carried by beast to be taken away and discarded or put out of sight. And then he says this, "The things you carry are burdensome." That's actually the thing about your gods. Your gods are a millstone hung around your neck. The false gods you worship are actually a burden to you. "A load for the weary beast. They stoop over, they've bowed down together. They could not rescue the burden." Kind of a strange thing that your God needed to be rescued, and you couldn't rescue your God. When it was the time for your God to go down, when the Persians and the Medes came in, Bel and Nebo were finished.

You can think a little bit, maybe a more familiar story, the God the Philistines worshiped called Dagon. When the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, they placed it in a subservient place in front of the God Dagon, which was the body of a man, but the head of a fish. In the morning, when the Philistines came to the temple of Dagon, the first time Dagon had fallen over, and it's sad and funny at

the same time, they captured the Ark of the Covenant. They put it in a subservient position in front of Dagon. In the morning, Dagon is like he tottered in the night and he's on his face. They set him up again because you can't be like, Dagon, hey, get up. Because it's just an idol. He doesn't hear. He's not a God. He's no power at all. So they set Dagon up because that's what you do with idols. You make them, you care for them, you set them up and hope they rescue you while you rescue them. The next day they came in and Dagon was again on his face, but this time his head and his hands had actually broken off of the statue itself, and they removed the Ark of the Covenant because at this point Dagon was broken and shattered before the presence of Yahweh. He says to the Chaldeans, this is going to happen. And he's not just the Chaldeans, even to the Israeli and the Judeans living in Chaldea among the Babylonians.

This is what's going to happen. The gods of the Chaldeans, the gods to which they attribute all of their blessings and all of their good, the gods that they worship and the gods they say are the The proof is that these gods have given them great victory over all the earth. These gods are actually going to fall down. Now, there's a little bit of a question in verse 2. "They stoop over, they bound down together, they could not rescue the burden." They themselves have gone into the captivity. And so the question, it's a little bit ambiguous. In one respect, the images, the idols, were themselves just visible representations of what were probably regarded as invisible spiritual powers behind those visible representations. If that's what it means, the point is that you couldn't even care for your own image. This is actually how you show your glory through this idol. And when that glory is taken away, you're not able to even rescue your own image. Or it could be that, in fact, There's really nothing more to them than the image. The God and the image are actually the same thing.

E. J. Young says of the idols, "They should bear the people throughout their life. Instead, they themselves must be born." Verses 6 and 7, ironically, facetiously makes the same point. "They lavish gold from the purse. They weigh silver on the scale. They hire a goldsmith. He makes it into a God." In other words, these gods are made. These gods are created. They're the handiwork of some artificer. "They bow down, they worship it. They lift it on the shoulder and carry it away. They set it in its place and it just says, and it stands." It does nothing. It's not an agent. It's not a power. It doesn't know you. It doesn't act for you. It doesn't care for you. And yet you've deluded yourself to thinking that's exactly what it does. The one may cry to it. It cannot answer. It cannot deliver him from his distress.

One point I want to make before we go to our second point. Are there idols that you're carrying right now that are a burden to you in which you are placing hope, only to be disappointed? This could be a physical object. It could be wealth. It could be reputation. Those things that we look to, to validate and promise us fullness of life and happiness and well-being that in themselves were never meant to do this. They could be innocent things. The Bible says that God gives us all things richly to enjoy. But we cease to enjoy those things when we serve them, when they become the things that absolutely determine and control our lives. And that thing is not itself God, Father, Son, Holy spirit. If your life is ordered and directed toward some good other than God, whether it is a created good or a positive evil, either way, you will be put to shame. Your God is coming down, if you take my meaning. Your God will stoop over and you will be standing there disillusioned. Here's the point.

Don't demand too much from created goods. I'm not saying don't demand too many created goods. That's another problem for another time. I'm saying don't demand too much from the created goods. I'm not saying don't enjoy them. What I am saying is don't serve them. Don't act like there's something other than handiwork that requires maintenance. And if the Lord should take them from you, that should not in any sense cut you off from your hope or your desires. All things richly to enjoy, but hold them with a loose hand, and certainly do not make them the objects of utter and utmost devotion.

Second, consider this, the God who carries us. And there's a little bit of a play going on here. Image makers must carry the images they make. Just you got that premise? Image makers must carry the image they make. I say this carefully, God also is an image maker. Like in this room in which it's full of image of God and his likeness. God is not an idolater. He doesn't make images and worship the images. He makes images and he provides for the images. But that's what you do. If you make the image, you're going to provide for the image. God provides for his image. That is to say, mankind and especially his covenant people. Look with me at verse three. By the way, this is also the first

command in the text. "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel," here we go, "who have been borne by me from birth." There's very clearly a juxtaposition in the text. Idols are borne by you. But people who really worship the true God are carried by their God. They don't carry their God. Their God carries them. This is the hopeful thing.

The true God is the God who bears our burdens. He's not the burden we bear. His burden is easy and his yoke is light. He carries us. We don't carry him. In fact, he says, We've been born by him from birth and have been carried from the womb. But watch this. He doesn't just carry you from the womb until you can walk on your own. Walking on your own isn't really a thing in the Christian life. You never walk on your own. Consider these two verses. First, Deuteronomy 1:31. "In the wilderness, they saw the Lord carry them." It says, "Just as a man carries his son," listen to this, "in all the ways which you have walked." It's just a little bit strange. Like, so was I carried or was I walking? Yes. All things are from him, through him, and to him. In him, we live, move, and have our being. That is to say, if you're walking, it's still God who's carrying you. He is placing each of your steps. He is watching you, hemming you in behind and before, directing each of your steps. Psalm 28:9 says this. It's a cry, "Save your people and bless inheritance. Be their shepherd also, watch this, and carry them." It doesn't say carry them until they don't need you to carry them anymore. It says carry them "forever."

Those who make the image bear the image. If you make an image and call it your God, you'll carry your God and be disillusioned. God makes image bearers and carries them. He says, Even to your old age, I will be the same. Even to your gray hairs, cradle the grave, God is the one who actually bears you along and carries you. You're thinking, How does he do that? How has he done that for me lately? Some of you are in trying God. You know that I love these divine provision text. How about this? In him, you have life, breath, and all things. I'll start there. We've got a lot of that going on in this room right now. The next breath you draw, thank you, God. That's his gift to you. He's the one who bears us. He provides for us. In fact, in him, we live, move, and have our being. He provides for our existence. He provides for our nature. He provides for our movement. He provides for our breath. He provides for, and then, well, Paul says all things.

How does he carry you? By general provision. But there's a provision even beyond that. For his people, he carries them by giving them grace, by giving them new life. In the case of the Exodus, he carries them by delivering them from the bondage in Egypt. Verse 4, back to our text. "Even to your graying ears, I will bear you. I have done it, and I shall carry you, and I shall bear you, and I shall deliver you." God does not abandon his handiwork. He doesn't just give us a good start. He gives us a good start. He gives us a good middle. He gives us a good finish. We're told in Philippians 1:6, that "he who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it unto the day of Christ Jesus." An idol will drag you down. God carries you upward until he finishes what he began. He says, I have made you. He provides for you life, breath, all things, even unto gray years.

What's the takeaway from this? Verse 5, "To whom will you liken me?" Let's step back a little bit. Who else does this for you? Who else is actually there? The thing is not even the relationships that you are blessed to have, even they cannot be guaranteed to you. Parents, in most cases, will be lost to you. In some cases, some of you have already lived to see the loss of your parents. Maybe if you're hoping in your children, you'll bury your own children. Maybe your best friend will get a job transfer and move to the other side of the country. Maybe you'll lose your job, the one that you loved and that provided for you. In other words, all these things that God gives us richly to enjoy that we should use with gratitude and thanksgiving and derive encouragement from them, yes to all of those things, but they cannot be ultimately what we hope in. God says, To whom will you liken me and make me equal and compare me we should be alike. Who else? Who else carries you so completely and thoroughly as God himself?

My third point. The God whose counsel carries along all of history. You might think yourself, Okay, so God does a little bit of carrying. I actually want to say not a little bit of carrying. He does all of the carrying because he's the one who decrees all things. Now, verse 8 and verse 9 gets a little bit confrontational, and I'll say why in just a moment. But first, remember this and be assured, recall it to mind, and then he calls the people now. He's talking here to those exiled Jews who are in Chaldea. "Call it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the things long past for I am God, and there is no other.

I'm God, there's no one like me." What was transgressive in the way they were thinking? I think it was something like this. When their very earthly expectations were dashed, that is to say, when Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple laid bare, the Ark of the Covenant taken away, Many of the people exiled. You can just read Lamentations if you want the nitty-gritty of this, a really grim telling of the destruction of Jerusalem. The interpretation is, Our protector failed us. If my protector were really carrying me, then my fortunes would not have turned. I wouldn't have lost my wealth. I wouldn't have lost my spouse. I wouldn't have lost my position, my rank, my reputation. Bad things wouldn't happen to me if If God were really carrying me. And then here's where you start theologizing in a really bad way. Then God must be like the gods of the nations. You know how the gods of the nations are? They sometimes win and they sometimes lose. Bel and Nebo are about to lose big time. They're going to fall down and be carried away. And the interpretation is, Oh, yeah, like Yahweh when Jerusalem fell and we were carried away.

He says, That's actually transgressive thinking. That's thinking like our God is like the gods of the nations. In fact, when you were carried away into exile, everything was going exactly according to plan. Again, I'll leave you to Isaiah and to Lamentations to read more on that. Verse 10, God God says, "I'm the one declaring the end from the beginning, from ancient times, things which have not been done, saying, my purpose will be established and I will accomplish all my good pleasure." In other words, my counsel is actually being worked out and everything is being carried along exactly according to plan. And the wheel and the woe, the fortunes and the poverty, the sickness and the health, actually all of this in my inscrutable counsel is working out exactly as I planned. Our God doesn't stumble. We actually saying that. Will he lose you? We said he won't. That's what this text is saying. Our God doesn't stumble. And what you interpret as God stumbling is actually a transgressive and idolatrous theology that you need to repent of. God sits enthroned in the heavens. Above the circle of the earth, he does all of his good pleasure. He works all things out according to the counsel of his will. It doesn't mean that we always see the next step, but we know the one who does. The idol's Bel and Nebo, which are false gods anyway, have no idea what's coming. They're going to go down. Yahweh knows what's coming, not because he sees the future, but because he's the one who decrees and orders all things. He gives a little preview of coming attractions in verse 11. He says, for instance, "Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my purpose from a far country." He's referring here to a man who's yet to come on the scene, the Persian king, Cyrus.

And Cyrus was like a carnivorous bird. He was himself an idolater. He was himself a wicked man, but he was also in God's strange design and providence, he was the very man that God had ordained to be the one who would release the captives to return to Jerusalem. This man who in himself was a bad guy was also the very one that God had appointed to be a source of great good and benediction to the people of Israel. Truly, I've spoken. Truly, I will bring it the past. I have planned it. Surely, I will do it. You don't carry God. God, he carries you, just like he carries all of history.

Finally, the God who carries salvation to us. You might be thinking to yourself, Oh, this is great, except that you don't know my heart. My heart's full of idolatry. There's hope for you. There's hope for you. First of all, the hope is not that the idol will somehow make it. You don't come to the true God without abandoning the idol. You cannot serve them and God himself. They have to be smashed. I said this in classes to some of you before. I'm not an iconoclast by nature. Part of it's because I'm a little bit of a retiring nature, which is to say by iconoclast, I don't like tearing things down. I'm just not I'm just not a wrecker. And it's not because of virtue, necessarily. It takes so much energy to tear stuff down. I like naps, and so I'm not really a wrecker, and I don't like destroying things.

But listen carefully. If the icon that controls your heart is a false god, that is to say something not God that you're treating as God, tear it down. Tear it down. This is where I want to say, even if you're not an iconoclast by nature, you need to be iconoclastic when it comes to the gods you worship. Destroy them, tear them down, crush them underfoot. Where are Marduk and Nebo now? Certain of those images are buried in the ground somewhere in Iraq, probably. Other ones of them are actually set up inside of museums where people come and look at them to cast their mind back on an older, benighted world. In fact, so delicate are they that they put them behind glass and won't even let you touch them because you might break them. That's perfect. That's exactly where idols belong. Inside of museums as human artifacts, crumbling before your very eyes.

Yahweh is not in a museum. Do you get what I'm after? Yahweh is not some artifact that needs to be taken care of. Yahweh doesn't need some curator to clean him off and set him up and hope he doesn't go to pieces in front of the viewing public. A couple of things on that. First of all, Yahweh doesn't have pieces. He's not going to fall apart. There just aren't parts. He's the God of all creation, from whom and through whom and to whom are all things. He's the I am that I am who makes all, sustains all, directs all according to his own inscrutable purpose and counsel.

And listen, you're thinking, okay, that's great. But there's still this moral problem. I'm an idolater. And so are you. My heart has laid hold of things other than God and sought my life, my good, my joy, ultimately from those things. And what am I to do? The last two verses address this. "Listen to me, you stubborn minded, you who are far from righteousness." You ready? "I will bring my righteousness. It is not far off." You need righteousness because you lack it? God will take care of that well. He carries you by, as it were, carrying righteousness to you. 1 Corinthians 1:30. Paul says that "Christ has become to us righteousness from God." Do you want the righteousness of God to cleanse your heart? The righteousness from God has come. Christ incarnate is righteousness from God. Christ has come to tear down your idol. Christ has come to set up proper worship in your heart. Christ has come to make you see that it's only God who carries you. Christ carried righteousness to you, and Christ carried your sins in his body on the cross, and Christ carries his people with him to heaven. Christ is God the Son as God of old, carrying his people. And you know what? He came, just at the right time. Again, verse 13, "My righteousness is not far off." Galatians 4:4 says that "in the fullness of time, God sent forth his son to be born of a woman, to be born under the law, that he might redeem those who are under the law."

God has taken care of that as well. If you're like, boy, it's nice that God carries people, but what about me? Because I've been carrying idol. He came to unburden you of the idol and take your burdens on himself. Cast your cares on him for he cares for you.

A final text to consider as we go. 1 Peter 3:18. "Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust." Listen to this line, "so that he might bring us to God." You see what Christ is up to? He's up to exactly what God does, carrying people to life, to joy, to happiness, to God himself, so that he might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit.

Pray with me. God, you're good and you are kind, and your kindness was never more abundantly displayed in the sending forth of your son. You brought your righteousness to us, and by your righteousness, you cleansed our hearts and removed our sin from us. Lord, if any in this room have not been unburdened by Christ who bears our burdens, may this be the day in which they cast all their cares on him, that they no longer serve the creature, but rather the Creator, saying thank you for your created gifts, but giving worship to you alone. Lord, we pray that you would do this work continually in our hearts as your Spirit sanctifies us to be more and more like your son, Christ Jesus. And we ask it in his powerful and strong name. Amen.