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## THE FRIST

There's a certain theme in my life, one that continues to cycle around no matter how old or "wise" I become. It's one of those lifelong lessons I've never fully mastered, the kind that God will not recant on, a lesson he's not afraid to deliver to me over and over again in different packaging: Oh wow, it's ... you again.

I don't know if you have one of these, that running area of life that seems to be the target of every sermon, Scripture, and circumstance. It's an area of growth you can't seem to get away from, the one that God is always prodding and pruning even at the most inconvenient of times, like holidays. Can I not just eat my turkey without my character being refined? It's a phenomenon, but God doesn't even take Thanksgiving off, except perhaps in the rest of the world where they don't celebrate it.

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Never does he slumber; he is always working on this recycling theme: No gods before God. It's the first of the Ten Commandments and one of the most fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. How hard can this be? Yet just as I think I have a handle on it, another false god is exposed in my life. And I'm not talking about a physical statue that I accidentally stumble upon in the recesses of my closet, or a stone idol that I occasionally pray to. Nothing like that. But ... sort of like that.



The other day I coerced one of my self-employed friends, Alli, to justify my neglect of work by heading with me to the Frist Museum in the middle of the day. It's essential to take others down with you when playing hooky—there are certain delinquent behaviors that must be done in groups. Fortunately Alli was an easy sell, since she's far more hip than I am and holds a season pass. With a mere phone call, work was tabled and we were off to Egypt—at least to the bits they could fit in the Frist.

We followed each other around with headsets and MP3 players that gave us the history of each piece. I kept making Alli pause her machine so I could comment, as if I had something to add to the British historian eloquently whispering in our ears. There were all sorts of wild displays, from standard mummies to children's games whose stakes were a little higher than I was comfortable with—eternal damnation for the loser. Hadn't they heard of Candyland? We saw ornate jewelry, fine paintings, and a tiny wooden chair over two thousand

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years old. It intrigued me to think of all the history that little chair had made it through—the crumbling of massive empires, the birth of Christ, and I’m guessing a lot of family squabbles. I’m sure it was very tired of being sat on. I can’t remember our favorite exhibit, though I do recall us tarrying over a mummified cat that looked strangely like a hot dog. Not something I would have tried to preserve, but that’s just me.

Even beyond the disturbing animal mummies, I have a poignant memory that I will never forget. It was one of the first things Alli and I saw upon entering the exhibit, and it was the last thing I remembered: a towering statue in the form of a sphinx with human legs holding out a symbol of life. The colossus was a bit cracked in places and a few pieces from the face had broken off, but for the most part it had fared well. The British voice in my headset said that the Egyptians would bow down before this exact statue hoping that life would be extended to them.

As I took notice of every detail, I remember thinking how I couldn’t imagine that anyone would ever believe that this lifeless rock could do anything, much less give life. I remember thinking how strange it hit me, how I could never see myself hoping for life to spring from stone. Until the next words that crossed through my mind were *You do it all the time*. (This was no longer the British woman.) In fact, the words weren’t even audible, but every bit as definitive. If you can know a silent voice, I knew this one.

*Lord, I would never look for life from something like this.*

*But you look for life in lesser things than me all the time, every day.*

I was struck. Quiet, I stood before this idol suddenly aware that all

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the things I had placed my full hope in were not a hair more able. Suddenly I realized that I had been looking to weak things, even *good* things, for life that only Christ can give. If I could display the images that splashed through my mind, you would have seen the statue turn into familiar faces from my life, career paths, and dreams. Not necessarily bad things, just things that had become detrimental because I had exalted them as gods, things I believed could bring me life.

As I continued staring, I thought about the idols of our culture: the television, body image, boyfriends, girlfriends, food, shopping, family, children, alcohol, money, houses, spouses, drugs, religion, even our own sense of righteousness. Ouch. The cracked rock statue didn't seem so silly after all. In fact, if only the ancient Egyptians could see us today: an extra helping of cookie-dough ice cream. A one-night stand. Hours of meaningless sitcoms. A bottle of vodka. They would probably shake their heads in bewilderment, wondering what any of these things held over their sleek stone images.

As the Lord continued to expose all the things I had put in place of him, I realized that this was not unique to me. Passages from Genesis and Isaiah, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the Psalms and the Gospels, Ruth, Romans, 1 John, and virtually every other book in the Bible address the issue of false gods in one way or another. It is a ubiquitous theme. The problem is, when we come across these passages, we often think of statues, sculpted idols, and foreign countries. The entire concept is relegated to far-off peoples in far-off lands. We don't think of the litany of modern-day gods we depend on daily for comfort, relief, protection, happiness, life....

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Or, if we do think of these things, we tend to think of the ones that are on the universally “bad” list: sexual sins, pornography, alcoholism, and drug addiction. But what about the false gods that are inherently good? Things like friends, spouses, material possessions? The things that have only become bad because we have made them the “ultimate” things in our lives. In some ways, this feels far more common. John Calvin put it similarly: “The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.”<sup>1</sup>

Ah, yes. I have wanted some darn good things a bit too much a time or two. Good things that became ultimate things that became controlling things. Things I bowed down to, perhaps not literally, but with every other piece of my being. Not too different from the Egyptians. After all, they bowed for the same reason we do: a desire for life.

As I walked away from the Frist that day, I was thankful for the unexpected but freeing moment that caused me to further relish the voice of the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t condemning but enlightening, gentle but convicting. A conviction that demanded my repentance while extending the truth that God wanted me to trust him for far more. To clear out the idols in my life, not for the sake of legalism but for a much grander purpose: to make room for the God of gods to dwell. To see him do more than I could ask or think—more than a rock statue or a husband or a martini could ever provide.

Perhaps you are longing for the same things. Exhausted by the strong cords of a small god. Weary from serving something that forever promises but never delivers. Angry at an idol that constantly leaves you

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disappointed, but swears there is no other place to go. If only the Egyptians had known there was a God stronger than the stone sphinx. If only we knew. I talked Alli's ear off about it on the way home. I think she was really missing the British lady.