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Idolatry in Theory

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What do you think of when you think of “stampede”? (Maybe Jumanji? I don’t know. That was the first time I ever heard the word, at least.) I think about the stampede of 2015 where over 2000 people were trampled on and crushed to death in the annual Hajj pilgrimage that millions of Muslims make annually to visit Mecca.

Ruth Graham, reflecting on this recent stampede, wrote an article for *The Atlantic* entitled “Why Do Crowds Run?” Among the numerous statistics she provides for religious stampedes around the world, there’s this final paragraph that says a lot about America’s religion: “And although it’s easy to assume that stampedes are caused by panicked crowds running away from something in fear, Seabrook found that, in general, that’s only true in fires. In most stampedes, the crowd is churning toward something. In the United States and Europe, stampedes are rarer than they are in the developing world, and they don’t tend to happen on religious occasions. Americans and Europeans stampede for other causes: Black Friday sales, rock concerts, and sporting events. No one person decides to stampede. But if there’s a connection between what attracts a crowd and what a society holds dear, then stampedes are a deadly illustration of those values.”

What’s she saying is that stampedes are usually for religious reasons all around the world (and they’re becoming quite the problem), but why we have stampedes says a lot about what we value most in society. What we worship, if you will.

What we value most, as individuals and as a society, is essentially idolatry in a word. Biblically speaking, we might word it like this: idolatry is whenever anything in our lives is a) exalted above God – **Exodus 20.3**, “You shall have no other gods before me”; and b) desired before God – **Colossians 3.5**, “Put to death... covetousness, which is idolatry”.

There’s a third aspect, too, that gets interesting. In **2 Kings 18.1-8**, we read an interesting story about good king Hezekiah. During his early

reforms, he discovers his people are worshiping a god named ‘Nehushtan’. But here’s the thing: ‘Nehushtan’ was actually the bronze serpent Moses had constructed to heal the Israelites from their snake bites in **Numbers 21**. They had kept it for all that time and were now worshiping it as a god. This reveals an interesting reality about idolatry, that often it can be a good thing that becomes an ultimate thing, when the gift replaces the Giver.

Jesus told a story to this effect: *But he said to him, “A certain man was giving a large banquet and invited many. And he sent his slave at the hour of the banquet to say to those who have been invited, ‘Come, because now it is ready!’ And they all [alike] began to excuse themselves. The first said to him, ‘I have purchased a field, and [I must] go out to look at it. I ask you, consider me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have purchased five yoke of oxen, and I am going to examine them. I ask you, consider me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and for this reason I am not able to come.’ (Luke 14.16-20)*

The story ends with the feast master being angry and therefore sending invitations to all those in the highway and byways to come fill the mess hall where none of those initially invited will taste of the feast. But really think about that. What were their excuses? It wasn’t drugs, promiscuous nights, or money laundering, etc., that kept them from the feast. It was good things: a wife, oxen, and a purchased field.

The question for us is what is our center of gravity? What compels us, pushes us forward, attracts us? Are there things we esteem above God, or desire more than Christ? Do we allow “good” things to become “god” things?

