

## The Problem With Christian Hero Worship

My daughter is a curious little toddler. She likes to explore anything and everything she can get her hands on. She's eager to learn about everything she sees—from people to animals to toys and food. It's sweet to watch her take an interest in so many things.

But sometimes, her curiosity makes her miss what she's meant to see. Sometimes when she opens a present and finds an exciting new toy inside, she gets fixated on the box rather than the present inside it. Other times she might ignore a whole room full of toys meant specifically for her because she'd rather play with the spatula in the dishwasher or the junk mail on the kitchen table. We can easily recognize how her focus is misplaced, but we often find ourselves in her position in God's eyes.

I cringe when I see people glorifying Christian leaders. That might sound harsh, but it's what I do. Praising a favorite Christian singer or famous pastor instead of the Lord is like choosing to love the box more than the toy inside. But more significantly, I cringe when I see those leaders accept that praise for themselves. The purpose of a ministry leader's mission is not to earn applause. These people should be using their platform to worship the Lord and draw others to Him as well.

Sometimes I feel like this is a modern problem that may go away on its own eventually. But it's not. This happened more than 3,000 years ago too.

### **Israel's Misplaced Praise**

Ancient Israel had its share of outstanding leaders, heroes of our own faith today. Men like Moses and Joshua blazed the trail to prosperity in the Promised Land. But that success was short-lived. After Joshua's death, "the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals" (Judges 2:11). So "the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them" (v. 16). Men and women like Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samuel defended the Israelites against their enemies. These leaders carried out God's will to protect His people despite their disobedience, yet they only saw the judges as a stopgap leading up to their desire for a king to rule over them.

After begging and whining to Samuel, whom God had given to Israel as its judge, the Israelites got their wish—but they broke God's heart in the process. "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:7), God told Samuel. So He gave them Saul, known as a handsome man and the tallest of all the Israelites (9:2). This is the kind of leader the people asked for, one who would make them "like all the nations," as they demanded "that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles" (8:20).

Of course, God didn't want Israel to be like all the nations. His people were meant to be separate, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). But Israel was happy! It got the king it wanted. But from the beginning, there were warning signs in Saul's behavior. He ran from responsibility (1 Samuel 10:22). He blatantly disobeyed the Lord (13:13; 15:24). He made

foolish declarations (14:24). Yet the people didn't seek the Lord; they looked to this man for help and guidance.

Despite his position of great privilege, Saul failed, and his sin was exposed. God took His Spirit from him (16:14). But it's not just the ones whose downfall we can see coming that we should be wary of. Even wise, righteous kings like David and Solomon sinned greatly (2 Samuel 12:13; 1 Kings 11:11); yet they were known as godly men.

I don't mean to strip them of their status as faithful kings; I simply mean to show the danger of worshiping sinful humans. No matter who you put on the throne, no one but God deserves our praise, and no one is worth our unwavering trust but God.

### **Punishment for Pride**

God showed time and time again the danger of men taking pride in themselves and accepting acclaim. When Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar arrogantly praised himself for his city's splendor, saying, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?" God drove him to insanity, causing him to become like a beast of the earth with hair like eagles' feathers and nails like birds' claws until he realized "that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (Daniel 4:29–33). Nebuchadnezzar eventually learned his lesson, finding that "those who walk in pride He is able to put down," even powerful kings like himself (v. 37).

When the evil King Herod Agrippa was credited with speaking in "the voice of a god and not of a man" and failed to give God the glory, an angel of the Lord immediately struck him and he died (Acts 12:21–23). Herod didn't realize he was merely a pawn compared to the King of kings, and his life was entirely in God's hands. He should have studied the book of Proverbs to realize that "pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

### **A Perspective on Purpose**

How many ministry leaders have we seen fall from grace because of scandalous sin? Too many to count. From entertainers to pastors to Christian authors and apologists, no one is immune to temptation of every kind. Quotable evangelists so often are exposed for misconduct, destroy their reputation, and leave their biggest supporters feeling confused, betrayed, and spiritually disoriented. Yet time and time again, they end up taking the adoration we should be reserving for God.

This is not to denounce our brothers and sisters faithfully serving the Lord publicly. We should be thankful for their work in helping point many to God and the truth of His Word. But we should leave behind any fascination we might have with them apart from God.

If you find yourself exalting the preachers of the Word rather than the Word Himself (John 1:1), redirect it to Him immediately. Too many times we see passionate faith in Christian leaders turn to devastating disappointment. It's time we let them do their job of leading us to a greater knowledge of our Lord without coming at the expense of worshiping Him exclusively. Let's learn

from Israel's shortcoming of trusting in men rather than God to make sure we live in a way that pleases Him.

by Jesse King

This document or the material within may not be reproduced in any form without the permission of The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.

© 2022 The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.