

The God Who Is Holy (Part 5 of 6)

The Lure and Lunacy of Idols

Exodus 32

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"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' So Aaron said to them, 'Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.' And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. And the LORD said to Moses, 'Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' " And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you." But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.' " And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." (Exodus 32:1–14, ESV)

How long has it been since you've uttered words like these?

- "What was I thinking?!"
- "Why is this bothering me so much?"
- "Why do I always respond this way?"
- "Why does this control me so much?"

Perhaps you can look back on a time in your life (or maybe it is right now), or you can see a pattern in someone close to you, and the words you would use to describe the situation would be: out of

control, troubled, reckless, or addicted. In other words, it seems as if the person is driven so deeply, craves something so passionately, or is haunted so profoundly that he loses his ability to think clearly and act maturely. You may even find yourself saying, “Man, he’s crazy.” And you don’t mean funny. You mean dangerous.

Perhaps it isn’t that extreme. Maybe it is a bit more subtle and nuanced. While you or the person you know isn’t “crazy,” there is an unusual power struggle in the soul when it comes to certain subjects or issues or people. If there were a microphone in your soul, it might sound like:

- “I just want to be happy”
- “I just want to be successful”
- “I just want them to like me”
- “I just want to be attractive”
- “I just want to be loved”

Sometimes you might have enough sense to ask yourself, “Why is this such a big deal?” But more often than not, there is just a nagging sense of a desire for something that you want – really want. You see, when it comes to what we want, sometimes there is just a lure. And other times it produces sheer lunacy.

The Bible describes this misplaced lure and lunacy as idolatry, and Exodus 32 is one of the best examples of the craziness and the consequences of misplaced desires that become deadly. This is the story of the golden calf. According to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, this story is given for our instruction “that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). So today I want to examine this story and the nature of idolatry and then see what we can learn about our own idolatry.

What Happened?

The book of Exodus is not simply a collection of stories regarding the people of Israel. There is a message that is being communicated about God, grace, atonement, and sin. That is important to remember because chapter 32 is an abrupt shift from instructions regarding the design of the Tabernacle and the people who would construct it to one of the most significant rebellions in Israel’s history. The shift and the extent of the failure are shocking.

Verse one indicates that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain. In chapter 24, Moses had ascended Mt. Sinai with the elders of Israel, and then he went higher into the mountain for 40 days (24:18). Chapters 25-31 cover the instructions that he received when he was on the mountain, and chapter 31 ends with Moses receiving the two tablets of testimony (31:18).

Keep in mind that prior to Moses’ ascent, the people heard the Law of God, and they said, “all that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex. 24:7). But it only takes 40 days, impatience, and fear to cause the people to break their covenant. The dramatic and quick turn away from God is part of the story.

Verse one records the demands of the people: *"Up make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."* Why did they make this demand? We'll look at the problem of idols later on, but it is likely there were two things going on: 1) impatience – Moses was gone for 40 days, and his fate was uncertain, and 2) fear – the people felt vulnerable, and they desired some level of security. The absence of Moses and the lack of any word from God put them in a tempting position to take things into their own hands. In other words, their desire for certainty and security tempted them, and the conversation with Aaron was likely a confrontation that felt more like a coup.

Aaron instructed the people to contribute their gold rings, and he made a golden calf (v 3-4). Then they (presumably the leaders of the insurrection) said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Aaron then built an altar and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord" (v 5).

There are few things to note here: 1) The choice of a calf was not by accident. It was a common idol image in Israel's day. 2) The people didn't actually think that the physical calf was their deliverer, but rather they used it as an earthly representation of their God. In other words, they had created an object of worship because God's provision at the time wasn't enough. They needed something to "fill the gap." 3) Aaron appears to try and appease the people. He makes the calf, he builds the altar, and then he declares a feast to the Lord. He seems to try to facilitate a "dual worship." Israel's problem here is that they are trying to live in both worlds, and Aaron is attempting to manage their misplaced desires.

The feast to the Lord turns out to be a bad scene. Verse six tells us that the people offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. This has to be connected to what happened in 24:4-5 at the covenant confirmation ceremony. It seems that the people are trying to replicate the worship of Yahweh but are doing it their own way. But the outcome is as predictable as it is terrible.

The latter half of verse six has this statement: "the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." The Hebrew word here for "play" is loaded. The NIV renders the verse this way: "they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." The Hebrew word for "play" or "revelry" is used to describe Isaac's sporting and flirtatious interaction with his wife Rebekah, which tipped off the King of Philistia that Isaac had lied about his relationship with Rebekah (Gen. 26:8). It is also used by Potiphar's wife as an accusation against Joseph when he refused her advances (Gen. 39:14, 17). So when the Bible uses "play," it is probably not talking about kickball or red rover. There is something about this activity that is pushing the envelope. In other words, their idolatry is leading to a self-centered celebration and perhaps sensuality.

Verses 7-10 shift the scene to God's view on this moment. Moses cannot see what is happening, so God informs him. God's judgment is that the people have corrupted themselves and turned from their covenant and that they are spiritually stubborn. God intends to kill all of them and start over with Moses.

Verses 11-14 represent one of the greatest examples of a servant-leader. Moses appeals to God as the mediator of the people, reminding God about His covenantal promises and the effects of stern

judgment on God's reputation in the world. God is understandably and justifiably angry, and Moses is able to appeal for mercy.

Once God's immediate wrath is quenched, Moses begins his journey down the mountain. According to verses 15-18, Moses was carrying the tablets from God, met Joshua during his descent, and heard the noise from the celebration. At the sight of the calf and the dancing (v 19), Moses understood God's wrath. He was filled with righteous anger, and he threw the tablets to the ground. The breaking of the tablets was a figurative picture of what the people had done in their rebellion. Next, Moses destroyed the calf by burning it, pulverizing it, spreading it on the water, and making the people drink it – a statement about the finality of the idol's destruction or a means of internalizing the guilt of the moment.

Moses' confrontation with Aaron is a sad moment. Moses asks Aaron directly what the people did to him that he allowed such a departure from God (v 21). Aaron's response is to shift the blame upon 1) the people's stubbornness and 2) uncontrollable circumstances. Aaron suggests that the calf miraculously came out of the fire (v 24). Verse 25 provides a summary and a commentary:

"Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies" (Exodus 32:25).

The idolatry of the people resulted in them being out of control, and Aaron had let it happen. Here is the lunacy of idolatry, and it is punished with severity. The Levites are called, and they are given instructions to administer justice on the people – about 3,000 people (presumably those who were leading and participating in the rebellion) were killed immediately (vv 25-29).

The final element of this story is the atonement that Moses seeks on behalf of the people. The danger of the moment is not over. Moses informs the people that he needs to meet with the Lord to offer atonement on their behalf. It is remarkable that Moses seeks forgiveness by offering his own life for the sake of his people:

"So Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.'" (Exodus 32:31–32, ESV)

But God will not take Moses' life for the sins of the people, as commendable and righteous as that thought is. Instead, God will deliver appropriate judgment upon the people. Verse 35 tells us what the Lord did:

"Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made." (Exodus 32:35, ESV)

The nation received the discipline from the Lord for their idolatry. The lure of security and fulfillment in a god of their own making led them into lunacy. They were crazy! It only took 40 days, and the people went from the awe of God to outright rebellion.

This story should make us tremble to see how far and how fast human beings can fall. Listen to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10, as he reflects on Old Testament stories like these:

"Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Corinthians 10:6–12, ESV)

There is a lure and a lunacy with idolatry.

Why Idols?

Now you might read this story and think – *what is the deal with these idols?* And part of the danger would be to not understand what is going on here and what the appeal is. A few months ago, I read an article on this subject by Doug Stuart in his commentary on Exodus. In it, he addresses the attractions of idolatry. Let me summarize the article for you. I think it will help you to not only understand idolatry better, but also to make the connection between the Old Testament and our lives.

1) Self-interest

Idols were never created without a self-centered concern. Idols were worshipped because of what they brought to the worshipper. There was a spiritual "quid pro quo." In the Ancient Near East worldview, an idol served as a portal or a conduit to another world. Therefore, the worship of an idol was only a means to an end. The idol connected them to the spirit world. But the basis of the relationship between the spirit world and the human world was the fact that the gods could do many things but feed themselves. These "gods" had power over fertility and abundance of crops, but humans had the power to feed the gods. Therefore, the human-divine interaction was based up mutual self-interest. If a human fed the god, then the god was obligated to bless him or her in return. To them, this was the way that the universe worked, and if you wanted any kind of blessing or abundance, then you had better feed the gods.

Idolatry was essentially about self-centered greed. By the way, Paul echoes this sentiment in Colossians 3:5 when he says "put off. . . covetousness which is idolatry." Underneath idolatry is a passion for self.

2) Convenient

Serving idols was a popular way to live because the frequency and generosity of sacrifices was the sum total of religious life. In other words, there were no ethical boundaries. You worshipped idols because of what you received, not because of any requirements beyond yourself. What's more,

there were places to offer these sacrifices everywhere. The Bible often talks about idols “on every hill and under every spreading tree” (see 1 Kings 14:23). So there were plenty of opportunities to live this way.

3) Normal

Idol worship was the established and settled way to live in the Ancient Near East. It was so embedded in the culture that it would have been very counter-cultural and even illogical to think this way. If an Israelite asked a Canaanite, “How do you farm this land?” The Canaanite would not have only told him about the specific farming practices, but he would have also emphasized the need to sacrifice to Baal and Asherah. Worshipping the fertility gods was considered part of the laws of life. Idolatry was a normal part of their world. Monotheism was the strange view.

The people of the Ancient Near East believed that there were multiple gods for multiple purposes. Throughout Israel’s history, the problem was not that Israel denied Yahweh’s existence. Everyone believed that Yahweh was the God of Israel. The problem was the addition of other gods. It was the day-to-day allegiance to these practical gods that got Israel in a lot of trouble. Idolatry usually looked like Israel was trying to create a theological potluck with a little taste of every culture. They never really abandoned Yahweh; they just added things to the mix that were normal for their culture and were practically reassuring.

4) Pleasurable

The final aspect is not surprising, but it is the most concerning. The enemy made the worship of these gods fun, enjoyable, and even sensual. The result was that the people were hooked. Idolatry was pleasing in three ways. First, idolatry was tangible. Part of the pleasure was the fact that worship was sensory. God wasn’t mysterious or hidden; He was tangible, physical, and attractive to behold. Second, the people did not eat meat unless it was offered to an idol. So the more meat you ate, the more you sacrificed. Therefore to “pig out” would simply increase the offering to the god. Gluttony and drunkenness were seen as being generous to the gods since they received a portion of everything imbibed. Third, there was a sexual component. It was believed that fertility on earth depended on fertility among the gods, and it was believed that there was a connection between what was done on earth and what happened in the world of the gods. Therefore, immorality was a frequent part of idol worship because it was believed that the more “activity” on earth, the more “activity” happened in the realm of the gods.

During dark seasons of Israel’s history, this kind of practice was intermingled with temple worship and had to be addressed (see 2 Kings 23:6-7). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 6, dealing with the issue in a secular setting, where believers were visiting the temple of Diana, and they thought it had no impact on their soul.

So now you can probably imagine why it was so difficult for Israel to tear down the “high places” and why God often describes their departure from Him as spiritual adultery.

The enemy wove into idolatry a dead cocktail of self-concern, convenience, peer-pressure, and pleasure. And all that needed to happen was for the people of God to still claim to believe in Yahweh and simply add the additional, practical gods into their lives.

Idolatry was never about the idol. What happened at the base of Mt. Sinai was never really about a golden calf. It was really about what the people wanted that they thought the idol would give them: security, identity, normalcy, power, and pleasure.

The lure of idolatry is that these things can seem so right and so needed. But the lunacy is that they are never really found in anything other than God. Idolatry is a dead trap that leads to despair.

What it means

So what do we do with this story? I would suggest that we listen to its message very carefully because I'm sure that when I was describing the problem of lure of idolatry, you recognized the pattern or the attraction in your own life. Let me give you a few things to think about as it relates to this issue.

First, an idol can simply be anything. An idol is simply something that serves as an alternative to God in your life. "It is anything that is more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give."¹ There are no limits as to what can become an idol.

Second, you need to know that bad things, but especially good things, can become idols. The problem with idolatry is that we take something that God intended to be blessing to us as a gift from Him. And we make the blessing about us, use it for our identity or happiness, and fall into despair or hopelessness if there is a possibility of losing it.

In my pastoral ministry, I've seen drugs or alcohol become idols. I've seen money, power, and possessions become idols. And I've also seen sex, marriage, affirmation, recreation, and even ministry become an idol. The enemy loves to use the good gifts of God as the platforms for godless, self-worship.

Third, you know you have an issue when the idol has become ultimate. A counterfeit god is anything that is so important to your life that should you have to part with it – by your own choice or not! – it feels that life isn't worth living.² By definition, an idol is simply anything that is more fundamental to your happiness, your identity, and your being than God.

Fourth, idols offer us promises that are fundamentally false. The lure of the idol is this script: "You'll be happier with me. You need me. You shouldn't have to live without me. You deserve to have

¹ Timothy Keller, Counterfeit Gods – The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters, (New York, New York: Dutton Publishing, 2009), xvii.

² Keller, xviii.

me.” Ultimately those promises can even turn very dark. The script sounds like: “Life isn’t worth it without me. You’d be better off dead than to live without me.” But that is a lie.

Fifth, the solution to our relentless, heart-based idolatry (see Ezekiel 14) is the heart transformation that comes from a relationship with your Creator by faith in Jesus Christ. It is only through the forgiveness and internal restoration that is offered through Jesus that our hearts can be truly satisfied. Jesus said, “Come to me all who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Rest from what? From trying to get your identity, your fulfillment, your hope from anything other than God.

Idolatry is trying to wring out from people, power, money, sex, affirmation, position, children, marriage, or ministry what can really only come from the good news that is found in Jesus Christ.

So my question today is not if you have idols. My question is what are doing about the idols that you and I both know are already in your life?

- “What was I thinking?!”
- “Why is this bothering me so much?”
- “Why do I always respond this way?”
- “Why does this control me so much?”

Beware of the lure and lunacy of idols!

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