

## The Golden Calf

By [Pastor Greg Doty](#)

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If you have a Bible, I want to invite you to turn with me this morning to Exodus. Chapter 32.

if you were with us last week, we looked at Exodus. Chapters 25, 26, and 27 where God has given to Moses, the God who is up on top of this mountain. It's the mountain of God, Mount Sinai, and he has told Moses about dimensions to build a tent. But it's not just any tent. It is the tabernacle. It is the place where God and his glory are going to dwell, where God and his glory are going to dwell for the for years to come, and He is going to lead his people through his presence there in this tent, and that he is dwelling in the midst of his people.

And we saw last week that it is not just the dimensions of a random tent. Rather, it is God showing us the way back to Eden. His presence is demonstrated through that tent and all that it represented because it pointed us forward to Jesus.

Now if, if we were writing a TV show or a movie, if there was a script here at the beginning of chapter 32, the screen would go blank, and there would be some subtitles that would come up, a Morgan Freeman kind of voice that would come up and say, "Meanwhile, back at the bottom of the mountain..."

Because the scene shifts. It shifts from the top of the mountain to the bottom, and that's where we pick up the story here at the beginning of chapter 32 - and I'm going to read various sections throughout chapter 32 and a couple of verses from verse 33:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "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 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*."

Now to verse 17:

When Joshua heard the noise and the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." But he said, "It is not the sound of shouting for victory or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear."

And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain, he took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it. And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my Lord burn hot. You know the people - that they are set on evil. For they said to me, "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 I said to them, "Let any who have gold take it off." So they gave it to me. I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

Verse 30:

The next day, Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin, and now I will go up to the Lord, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

Chapter 33 beginning at verse four:

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments for the Lord had said to Moses, "Say to the People

of Israel, 'you are a stiff necked people.' If for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments that I may know what to do with you." Therefore, the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments from Mount Horeb onward.

God's word for us this morning. Would you pray together with me?

Father in heaven, we pray that as we come to this your very word, that you would give us ears to hear and minds to know and a heart that would be receptive to what you say to us through Your Word this morning, Lord, in the difficulty of what these words convey to us, I pray that we might see the glory of Jesus all the More and his love for us, of your love for us demonstrated at the cross, and so Lord, would you help us this morning, help us not just to hear these words and to understand them intellectually, but that our hearts might be moved to die to our idols and to live unto Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

I want to invite you to use your imagination with me here for maybe a minute or two. I want you to imagine yourself at a wedding. It's either in a church, or it's in a chapel, it's somewhere. And it is gorgeous. As soon as you walk in, you notice the flowers. It's just a beautiful smell. Everything is just decked out in white flowers and lace, and it's just incredible.

And as you sit there, you realize they actually hired half of an orchestra to come and to play at this wedding, and the music is such that you'd wish you gotten there sooner. Imagine that in your mind that this is going on, the pastor and the groom walk out, and the groom, he's on the verge of tears, because it's his wedding day, and it's amazing and wonderful.

And the bridal party walks down the aisle. The groom's mom comes down the aisle and she sits and she's just enamored with her son. Finally, the back doors close, and then they open up again, and everyone stands, and in walks the bride in this glorious white dress, and the groom, he's bawling. Now the pastor's trying to keep him together, and the bride, she's bawling because it's just such a beautiful experience. And they both get it together, and make their way through the ceremony, "I do." "I do." They say their vows, and then the pastor says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride," and everybody goes crazy, and it's wonderful and then they walk out as husband and wife, and then the congregation goes to the reception, and most of the time that you've been at the wedding, you've been thinking, "How much money did they drop on this thing?"

Do you have that in your mind right now? Now you go to the reception, and it's no different. It's decked out, and you're waiting for the bride and groom to take pictures, and then the DJ begins to introduce the wedding party, and here's the best man and the maid of honor, and they come in and they do this, the dances and stuff that they do now, and they all come in. And then finally, here is that

moment where the DJs say, "Let's welcome Mr. And Mrs...." And only the groom walks in.

He's walking fast because he's kind of forgotten. He just didn't realize.

But his now wife, she's got on really big heels, and she's not used to spending a lot of time on really big heels and the dress keeps her from taking big steps, and so she's walking really, really slow. Meanwhile, he's ready to boogie, and so he's in there, and so the DJ says, "And now for the first dance of our couple..." but she's not there.

And then the groom sees an old girlfriend who somehow got invited to the wedding,

And he says to her, "Would you like to dance?" And he takes her hand, and she gets up, and she begins to dance, and they stare into each other's eyes, and he begins to say sweet little things that no one else can hear over the sound of the music. And they stare at each other, and they dance.

Now I want you to stop right there, and I want you to think about in your mind as you've imagined this. Don't say it out loud, but what do you feel right now?

We'll come back to that in a little bit.

But I want you to know first, I made this up.

Any resemblance to actual events that you're aware of are completely coincidental. I made that whole story up.

But the essence of it, I did not.

The essence of that story is what happens here in Exodus 32. The essence of that story of a people who, back in chapter 24 had God come to them, and He said, "I'm your God. You're my people."

And the people said, "God, what you tell us to do, we will do."

They're, in essence, saying to God, "I do."

And they say it twice, "God, we will be married to you. We're yours. We're going to follow you. We're going to love you. We're going to do what you say."

And now here in 32 we see them, the people of God, dancing with another, dancing with one who is not their spouse.

It's idolatry.

The essence of idolatry is cheating on God.

This morning, I want us to look at these words, to think about what idolatry is for just a moment, to think about how others, responded to it, and what the remedy for our idolatry is.

Moses has been up on this mountain for 40 days. That's all it took. It took 40 days, probably, less than 40 days.

There were 72 who went up on the mountain that we read about, and we talked about 72 of the representatives of the people who saw God. They sat down and had a meal with God, and they have now come back down off the mountain, and they are amongst the people. And one of those 72 was Moses' brother. His name is Aaron. He's been with Moses for a long time now.

And the people that are down at the bottom of the mountain say, "You know what, he's been up there a while. It's been a couple of weeks. What's taken him so long?"

And they can see the cloud up there. They can hear the thunder god is up there, and he's talking to Moses, and they're saying: "This is taking forever. Hey, Aaron. Why don't you make a god for us so that we could worship it?"

An idol is anything that we put in God's rightful place, anything that we worship besides Him. And the people say: "We need something to worship."

We were created as beings, as human beings. We were created to worship God. We were created to worship. Our hearts long to worship, but a part of the fall, our sinful nature, is that we will worship anything, anything other than God.

And so that's what the people are requesting of Aaron. "Give us something that we can worship."

And so Aaron says to them, "why don't you go ahead and just take off your earrings, not just you, but your wives, your sons, your daughters, everybody. Take off the jewelry and bring it to me."

And so they do. They take off their earrings, they throw them into a pile, and Aaron takes it, and he melts it all down. And it says - it's very specific here - it says that Aaron fashions this gold with a engraving tool, and he makes a small cow out of it.

Cows were often depicted as gods back in Egypt. So this isn't something new or novel. It's something that they've seen before. It's from the people that had held them as slaves. They worshiped cows, along with the sun, water and other

things. And so Aaron takes it and he molds it, he shapes it, he fashions it into this cow.

And he says, here: "Here, O Israel, is this cow." And the people say, "These are your gods. O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

It's not just that they make this little thing. It's that they give this idol credit, credit that only God deserves, that only God has done, and they say, "Here is this thing."

Remember that an hour or two ago, this cow was in your ear, the ear from which you heard from God at the top of the mountain.

Now you've melted it down, and we're going to give that credit. "This is what brought you out of Egypt, this thing that I just created, this thing that I just made."

Idols are anything that we put in God's rightful place, anything that we worship besides Him. And idols grab our affections in one way or another. We feed it, we build it, and we give it the credit that only God deserves.

Our idols, we build them, we create them, we feed them and we give them credit that only God deserves. And next, if all of this wasn't bad enough...

Aaron then proceeds, and makes this proclamation, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord."

Now he does say the word "Lord." He does mention God. And theologians have debated. You can find lots of different ideas of what he is actually trying to do here - is he trying to mesh, mix this cow with God on the mountain, and bring both of them along side by side?

If that's what he's trying, he fails. Or maybe he is trying to turn the people back. If he does that, he fails even more, because the next morning they rise up early, and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and to drink. And those words, if you've been with us over the last few weeks, hopefully sound somewhat familiar to you, because that's exactly what the people of God did with God.

When God said to them, "I'm your God, and you'll be my people." And the people said, "We will. We do. We're committing ourselves to you."

What are the people doing?

They're marrying another.

40 days or less after they committed themselves to God, they are now giving themselves to this idol. Idols work themselves into our hearts.

There was a pastor from long, long ago. His name was John Calvin. Many of you are familiar with him. Some of you might not be - but he was a pastor in Europe several hundred years ago. He's famous for a lot of things, but one of the things he's famous for is saying this: that our hearts are idol factories.

Our hearts are idol factories. We just crank them out, we make idols. What I want to dare, lovingly, respectfully, graciously suggest to you and to me this morning is that we are far more like the Israelites than we want to admit.

We make things into idols. Now we might not take our jewelry. We might not go and take our siblings jewelry, our parents jewelry, and start a fire in the backyard. "I'm going to melt this down." We probably don't do that.

Our idols might not be a small cow.

They might be good things that we've turned into things that we worship. They might be bad things that have become the things that we worship.

You see, there's good things that we can make, idols, a spouse, children, our education, where we get our education, our favorite sports team, a hobby, things that we love to do, things that God has gift gifted us with the ability to do those things. None of those things are bad. In fact, all of those, as far as I can tell, all those things are good,

A spouse and children and education and careers and hobbies, all of those things are good, and yet we can put the weight into that, that only God can carry, that only God deserves, that we can worship a spouse. We can worship our children. We can worship our children's future. We can worship our career. We can make all of these things an idol.

When they take over our hearts and our affections. When we build it, we feed it and we give it the credit that only God deserves. They can be bad things. They can be things that we're addicted to.

They can be things that we run to when life gets tough. We run to gossip. It becomes our idol. "I have to know. I've got to be in the know."

We can run to the things, not just what we hear, but the things that we see can become our idols, the things that we consume can become an idol. Things that are sinful can become our idols.

And the thing is that oftentimes, idols blind us to our own idolatry.

We don't see it, we don't realize it, and we get defensive about it. If someone were to say to you, "Hey, I think that might be an idol of yours." And if you get very defensive about it, perhaps that's what you ought to consider. Perhaps that's where your mind ought to say: "Well, maybe that is."

So what was the response? Let's think about two responses.

The first was God's response. In verses seven through 10, we see his response. God says to Moses, "Go down to your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, for they have corrupted themselves. They've turned aside from the way that I commanded them. They've made a golden calf."

God knows everything that is going on, and he says, "Leave 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."

What is God saying? Go back to the story I told you at the beginning. And I asked, how do you feel? Because some of you said, "You know what I feel right now. I feel like I want a name and pastor. If he's in the room, I'm going to meet him outside that door, right over there after the service, and I'm going to rough him up a little bit because..." no, that is not how this works.

And you're right, you're angry, you're mad, you are upset. Some of you are sitting there. And you're thinking, "I hear that story and I'm raging right now. Who does that?" Hopefully, no one in the history of mankind has done that. I hope not. I made it up.

But that rage, that anger that you feel, God felt that. That's what God is trying to get across, and there are echoes of Noah here.

God said, "Moses, my anger and my wrath - it's burning hot against them, and I'm going to consume them in order that I may make a great nation.

And out of YOU, that's what he's saying. "I'm going to wipe them away, just like I did all the people at the time of Noah. Oh, this one's going to be even more so. I am - just raging hot." That's bold. That's how God sees our idolatry.

And yet there's also something else. It's subtle, but I think it points us to the heart of God.

You may have seen at the beginning of verse seven - how God addresses Moses and the people.

He says, "Moses, your people, the ones you brought out of Egypt."

"THOSE people, YOUR people."



Now, I don't know if you've ever had children in your life before. Say you've been home with them all day, and your spouse has been out working or playing. Playing golf is probably the worst. Just for the sake of the illustration - Mom, you're at home, he's been playing golf. It has taken way more than the 34 minutes that it should have taken. It's been five hours, and he hasn't called, and then he walks in, and your child has just driven you insane.

And then you address that husband with the words, "your child has driven me crazy."

Suddenly it's no longer "ours." It's as if it's all Dad's fault.

It's what God is saying here. God is almost distancing himself in his wrath, in his anger, in his fury. God is saying, "Moses, those people - I am so angry at them because I created them to worship me and look what they've done. They're dancing. They've cheated on me with a cow, with a cow that they created out of earrings, earrings that I gave them, earrings that I've actually invited them to give in order to build my tabernacle."

The same time that God is telling Moses up on the mountain, "Collect for me, gold, silver, bronze, yarns, leathers, all of these things to make a tabernacle and its furnishings for My glory that I might dwell with you. You know what the people were doing with that? Making a cow so that they could bow down and worship it!"

And these words are intended for us to look at and to laugh and for us to think, "That's ridiculous. Why would they do that?"

Well, I do the same thing because God has invited me, even if we just keep it to the comparison of their gold to our treasure. God invites us to give our treasure to him, and yet we so often run after our idols and say, "Well, I'm going to..." I hope this isn't you. I just thought about it this morning.

I've been watching the Tour de France bike race. It goes all around France. I love watching it, so I looked it up because I think, "These highly trained athletes - I can go do that. So how much does a bike cost?"

Because it's easy to ride up four, 5000 foot mountains in a day. "I can do it. Let's go!"

I'm looking at this bike online. I'm never going to ride a bike. I've got a bike in the garage that I never ride, and yet there's this \$10,000 bike that's screaming at me, "*This is what you want!*" And I'm thinking, "Oh, I could buy that. But then I won't be able to tithe for a little while, because I want this."

It's become this idol.

So what's the remedy? If God sees our idolatry as something so serious as this, what then is the remedy? Does God indeed wipe them out? Is that how the story goes, and God starts over with Moses like he started over with Noah?

He doesn't, because Moses goes to God, and we didn't read those verses - I didn't read them because I want you to go and to read them at home this week, in chapter 32. Your homework is to read 32 and 33, and to think about how all of these things work together, and how our own idol factories might function.

But here's what Moses does. He goes and he prays to God.

He stands in the gap of the people. He's representing them, and he says to God, "God, how would you look if you did that? If you wiped all of these people away? What are the nations going to think of you?"

"God, remember when I wrote Genesis, and you told me the story of Noah, and there was the rainbow, and that was the promise that you would never flood the earth again, that you would never wipe us out again, God, are you going to be a liar?"

He goes to God with who God is, and he says, "God, let me stand in in the gap."

And in verse 30, the next day after he comes down from the mountain, he takes the tablets. He's so enraged at the people, because at the end of verse eight, it says "they ate and they drank and they rose up to play."

It was debauchery.

It was horrible. They were living in hedonistic fashion.

And Joshua, who is Moses' assistant, as they're coming down the mountain, remarks, "I hear the noise in the camp. It sounds like war, but they're not cheering."

They're not shouting the victory or the cry of defeat. They are singing. They are having a party. Moses takes the tablets and he throws them to the ground, and the next day, he says, "You have sinned a great sin."

Verse 30: "And now I will go up to the Lord, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

Moses understands that the only way that this is remedied is through an atonement, is through someone taking the wrath of God that they deserve. The wrath is either going to them or to someone else.

Moses is saying, "Lord, could there be someone else? Give it to me if I have to be wiped out so that you may save the people."

In chapter 33 - if you just read it, in isolation, it's kind of a weird chapter. It seems almost disjointed, because you can actually go from the end of chapter 31 and you can go back to chapter 35 - cutting out 32,33 and 34 - and if you cut those out, you wouldn't have missed a beat, because from there on to the end of the book, it's about them actually building the tabernacle.

And so this kind of plops its way right in the middle.

But in chapter 33, all the sudden, we're introduced to this thing called the Tent of Meeting. It sits outside of the camp, but it's where Moses has gone before the tabernacle is built. That's where he goes when he's not on the mountain to talk with God. And when he would go there, God would come down at the entrance to that tent, and the people in the community, inside the walls, if you will, would go to their door and look, and they would worship.

They would go there, and they would worship. And then Moses asked: "God, can I see you? Can I see your face?"

And God says, "Nobody can see my face and live. But here's what I'll do, Moses, I'll cause all my goodness to pass before you, and I'll hide you in the cleft of the rock."

And as God does that. The Bible says the Lord is "gracious to whom He will be gracious, and he will show mercy, on whom He will show mercy."

And all of the glory of God Passes before Moses. What does this tell us?

It tells us that the remedy to this is not to be found in us. It's not in our simply trying harder. "Well, I'm not going to have that idol. I'm going to do this..."

But it's for someone to stand in our place, to realize the wrath that we deserve, that we were that groom at the wedding, and God has said, Come and be married to me. And then we went and said, "Hey, here's a cow. Let me dance with it."

And most of us laugh as to how preposterous it would be to say and do something like that. And yet also to realize, "Oh, that's what I do."

Who will take the wrath?

Jesus will.

Jesus will bear this wrath that is burning hot within God, that is due not just to them, but to us. He takes the wrath that's due to us, and that now our response is, is to go out into worship, to worship the one that we were created, to worship, to see him and his glory, to come and to see more of who Jesus is for us, and we say this all the time here at Willow Creek, for us to go deeper into the gospel.

We don't move past the gospel, but we rest in it. We hold on to it. We cling to it. We let it wash over us, moment by moment of every day. We come and we realize the grace that God has given to us, because what we deserve is His wrath, and what we've been given is His grace, and he has given to us life anew, so that our eyes are so fixated on Jesus that we don't have time for idols, that our eyes are so fixated on the glory of God that is passing before us that we would be so enamored with him that we see nothing else.

Remember that groom, that groom back at the beginning, the made-up groom, as he walked into that reception, he shouldn't have seen anybody else there, because in that moment, he should only have eyes for her.

And that's what God invites us to. To only have eyes for him, to focus on Him and to come to him in and through the gospel that we get to celebrate now, as we come to his table, to be reminded that He invites us to come and dine with him, to sit down and eat with him, that we are being pointed forward to the marriage feast of the Lamb, where we will get to see him face to face.

Let's pray:

Father in heaven. Thank you for your Word this morning. Thank you for the fact that your word doesn't sugarcoat anything. It comes right out. It tells us these stories so that we might learn from them, because these words this morning, lets us see our idols, to see those things that we cling to, the things that we hold on to, and let us repent.

We are like them in so many ways. And so, Lord, I pray that as we've thought about these things Lord, the people repented. They took off their earrings for the rest of the journey because it reminded them of their idolatry. They turned.

And so Lord, let us turn. Let us repent and let us rest anew today in the glorious hope that we find in Jesus, that we can rest in Him and in Him alone, that he took the wrath, and that we now receive His righteousness, and that you will never forsake us, and you will never leave us, and may we rejoice in that.

And so Lord, as we prepare, as we sing, as we confess, as we come to your table, Lord, we pray that you might prepare our hearts to receive your grace. In Jesus name, Amen.

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