

The Golden Calf

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[0 : 00] Please have a seat, friends. I must confess it would have been so easy to skip this chapter from the book of Exodus. It would have been so easy to avoid this really sad event and tragic, really, and it's the lowest point of the whole book of Exodus, the idolatry of the worship of the golden calf.

Just as God has rescued them and carried them, and they're here to worship him, and they're worshipping a golden idol. People have said it's like having an affair on your wedding night. And it actually sets a real theme for idolatry in the rest of the Old Testament. And we've always had pagans. We've always had people who have worshipped statues or worshipped false gods. What's new here is the idea that people who are monotheists, who know God, the true and living God, would mix in idolatry into their life.

What they do, they do in the name of Yahweh. They say, this is our God who brought us up out of Egypt. That God's own people would syncretism, that they would mix in idols into true worship.

[1 : 21] That is a thorn in the side of God's people which plagues us today. And also this theme today of unfaithful leadership, of Aaron, of all people who should know better.

He really is the first in a long line of priests who lead the people in mixed worship, of mixing the worship of the true God and of idols, of ungodly, unfaithful, adulterous leadership that plagues the church today.

Friends, why would this happen? I'm of the mind that we are no different to the people in this chapter. If we were there, we would do the same thing. Why are we like this?

Why are we so prone to idolatry? The reformer John Calvin said that man's nature is a perpetual factory of idols.

He has in mind that an idol can be something invisible. It doesn't have to be a statue. It could be just anything that you worship, anything that you live for, that you fear losing, that you are passionate and obsessed with, becomes an idol for you.

[2 : 36] And our hearts are idol factories. We create them out of nothing. We don't even need a plank or a log of wood. We are like this, I think, because we're made in the image of God.

Therefore, we are worship machines. We are made to worship. It's who we are. We are worshipers. And if we won't worship God, we'll worship something else. Here's how one person's put it.

Because we are made in the image of God, we will worship. In fact, we must worship someone or something. Either our original, that is, God, the original in whose image we're made, or we'll worship something else.

Maybe the illusion that we are the original or that we are our ultimate point of reference. Friends, we are not our ultimate point of reference. God is. But we are prone to worship other things.

Ultimately, ourselves, we are prone to idolatry. So, you know, just put yourself here. All the people took off the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron.

[3 : 44] He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf. And they said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

They take what belongs to the true and living God and interpose and intertwine idols into that. It's shocking, really, that they would insult God in this way.

Friends, we are made to worship. They are made to worship. We are made to worship. There's no question that there are idols in your life right now. There's no question that they're at least at the door trying to break in.

If you have a temptation, that temptation of sin itself is, there'll be idols bound up with that. We need to ask God to show us what are our idols.

They may not be as obvious as a golden calf. They may be subtle things. Do you idolize power? Do you idolize money?

[4 : 45] Do you idolize gratification, lust? Do you idolize reputation, your fame? Have you made a god of what people think of you?

Are you driven that people give you their approval? Idols can be anything. An idol can be a good thing, a gift from God.

But if you live for it and put your trust in or hope in it, then it becomes an idol. Prosperity is a good thing. Prosperity can be an idol, and I think is an idol for Western Christians.

Financial security can be an idol. Family, having babies can be an idol. Such a wonderful gift of God, and yet if it captures your heart and your passion in a way that becomes worship, it's an idol. Your career can be an idol. In many families, education is an idol, isn't it? That the unspoken rule is that you've got to get a good education. You've got to get a degree and do well for yourself.

[5 : 53] It's become a god. Self-protection can be an idol. The pursuit of good health can be an idol. Especially as we are in a world where God calls us to suffer for the name of Christ, if you live for self-protection and don't take up Christ's call to carry your cross, which in itself is an image of suffering, then you're made an idol of health or self-protection.

Success can be an idol. God wants you to be successful, yes, but if you're driven for success at the expense of God, then you now have a new God, a false God.

Food can be an idol. And I think closer to home, being righteous, being a good Christian, can actually become a form of idolatry.

You know, that you're driven to be, you're a moral person, you're a good person, you follow the Ten Commandments and you look down on those who don't, especially other Christians who don't.

Being righteous can be a form of idolatry. Worship can be a form of idolatry. When you're passionate about, church must be done my way, and you've stopped actually loving God with your heart and praising Him from the depths of your soul, and you're just thinking about, must be done my way.

[7 : 22] It's become an idol. Being theologically correct can be an idol. As important as the truth is, if you're obsessed with who's right and who's wrong and dotting every I, as important as biblical truth is, that can become a form of idolatry, where, in a sense, you puff yourself up in theological correctness and knock others down.

You've long stopped thinking about the God of your doctrine. You're just thinking about your doctrine. Idolatry is a great danger for Christians, for religious people.

C.S. Lewis said, Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst. Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst. Of all created beings, the wickedest is the one who originally stood in the immediate presence of God, Satan.

Israel have been with God. He's taken them from Egypt on eagle's wings to this mountain for worship, and yet they worship this idol.

They mock him. Friends, we have been rescued through the blood of God's one and only Son.

That's a wonderful thing. How mocking it is of God to mix in idolatry with that.

[8 : 47] Friends, let's not insult the Son of God. Let's fight idolatry. Let's admit that we are tempted by idols. This, for me, is argument enough why coming to church is not enough.

This is why we need the fellowship of other Christians because only when you share your Christian life with other people, they will show you and hold you accountable to idols that you are blind to.

This is argument enough, I think, to read your Bible every day and to ask God, to plead with God, show me what my idols are and let God's word shine a light on your life.

Friends, we need to plea the blood of Christ and fight. In the power of the Spirit, fight idolatry. Ask God, where are my idols?

And there's something in God's jealousy and his omniscience that as soon as this happens, God knows and he tells Moses, go down at once, verse 7, your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely.

[9 : 59] They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them. They've cast for themselves an image of a calf and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it and said, these are your gods, O Israel, who have brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

God knows idolatry, he hates it. He calls it for what it is, he calls a spade a spade, he says, this is perverse. My people, they are perverse.

They have turned from me to worship an idol. And he's angry, he's jealous. Put yourself in God's shoes, all that God has done for them.

He's fed them. He has taken them by the hand. He's carried them, as it were, on eagles' wings and yet they do this. God, they are perverse, they have mocked him and God is right to be angry and this is God's initial plan of judgment.

He says in verse 9, I have seen this people how stiff-necked they are, how stubborn they are. Now let me alone, Moses, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.

[11:12] Of you, Moses, I'll make a great nation. Let's start again. But I'm going to destroy them, is what God says. You see, friends, this is right.

This is what we deserve. God's response to our idolatry is judgment. It is destruction. Whatever else happens in this chapter by way of mercy and mercy comes, the baseline is they all deserve to be wiped out for their idolatry from the oldest to the youngest.

They've done it as a group. They deserve to be wiped out as a group. We know from the teaching of Jesus Christ that judgment is eternal.

Judgment, hell, is eternal. This is God's right response to our idolatry. God alone is worthy of worship. He's worthy of endless honor, endless praise, infinite worship.

This is what Jonathan Edwards said. Because sin against God is a violation of infinite obligations, sin therefore must be a crime infinitely terrible and so deserving of infinite punishment.

[12:33] That's what's deserved. It's not what happens but it's what's deserved. Let's see what happens now. Moses beautifully steps in as an intercessor and he pleads with God.

He pleads for mercy with a sort of a three-point prayer. Point one, O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

God has said to Moses, look what your people have done. Moses says, they're not my people, Lord, they're your people. You rescued them. They're yours. So he appeals to that sense of God owns them, God's rescued them.

They're his. That's the first part of the prayer. Second part, verse 12, why should the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and consume them from the face of the earth?

Turn from your fierce wrath, change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Moses says that the Egyptians are going to say that God planned all along maliciously to destroy these people, that they've been set up to fail, that God is a malicious God and it will impugn the majesty and the reputation and the glory of God.

[13:54] If you did this, it would make God's reputation worse in the world. It would tarnish what people thought of God. Third part of the prayer.

So we've had, they're your people. Think of your own reputation, God. And thirdly, verse 13, remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven and all this land that I've promised, I will give it to your descendants and they shall inherit it forever.

Remember your promise, God. You promised that you would multiply this nation and bring it to the land. Keep to your word, O God.

And how does God respond to this intercession? Wonderfully, he responds with new mercy. Verse 14, the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

God relents, God changes his mind. It's similar language to the book of Jonah that we looked at earlier. God opens a new door, a door of mercy. They are perverse, they don't deserve it.

[15:11] And Moses never argues that they're an okay people. He never says, oh, they're not that bad. He appeals to mercy alone. He appeals to the glory of God alone.

You see, Moses knows that God wants his glory to cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Moses knows that ultimately God rescues for his own glory, that God works for his own glory.

So the best way to pray, when you're bankrupt, the best way to pray is for the glory of God. That's exactly what Moses does. He pleads with God, change your mind, and God changes his mind.

He says, you swore to them by your own self. This is your promise, God, this is your glory at stake. And God responds with mercy. Friends, when you're morally bankrupt, when you need something or you want something badly, you're praying for it, bank on the glory of God.

Sell it to God on the basis of his glory. If you're praying for someone to come to faith, plead with God, say, God, I would so honor you for this person to become a Christian.

[16:22] Now it's true that God is actually glorified in judgment as well as salvation, so he's not bound to answer, but it's a great way to pray and a great way to think about your life as being for the glory of God.

When you've got nothing to bank on, when you deserve nothing, bank on the glory of God. It's unstoppable. And so Moses goes down the mountain, he picks up Joshua on the way, Joshua seems to be waiting halfway up, and they hear noise, and Moses, it's interesting that he doesn't say anything initially, he just grabs the calf, destroys it, grounds it up, makes them drink it, and then he speaks, says to Aaron, what did these people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?

There's a real sense here that the leadership is accountable for what has happened. Now listen to Aaron weasel out of it. Do not let the anger of my Lord burn hot.

You know the people, they are bent on evil, blames them. 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 don't know what's become of him.

Actually they do know, they know he's with God. I think he's been up and down a couple of times actually, we've already been given the Ten Commandments. They know where he is. So I said to them, whoever has gold, take it off.

[17:52] See, Moses has tried acquiescence, he's tried blaming others, and now he just sort of plays the fool. He says, I threw the gold into the fire and out came this calf.

He sounds really stupid, doesn't he? Idolatry is really stupid. If we know the living God, to live for something else is stupid as.

There is no excuse. What excuse will you have on the day of judgment? There is no excuse. We can only plead the blood of Christ. And as Moses has rebuked them, destroyed the idol, there is a sense in which in verse 25, the idol is gone, but the people are still nuts.

They are still running wild. And it blames Aaron in verse 25, for Aaron had let them run wild to the derision of their enemies. There is a need for some punishment or for some discipline or for some chastening to curb the people, to bring them into line.

And so Moses calls to the sons of Levi, to the priests, who is on the Lord's side? Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, put your sword on your side.

[19:06] Each of you go back and forth from gate to gate, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor. So they do that. As Moses commanded, about 3,000 of the people fell on that day, Moses said, today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourself this day.

God's holiness must be placated, there must be some curbing, some discipline, there must be something to bring God's people into line.

We know they all deserve to be destroyed. God's blood. So this is still mercy that only 3,000 are killed on this day. But it's not pretty, it's quite brutal, it's quite ugly, but they are commended by Moses and therefore God for standing up for the Lord and not siding with the idolaters.

The sons of Levi are honoured for what they do, because they honour God. it reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 10, whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.

The Levites have sided with God, not with their brothers. Whoever does not take up, and Jesus said, whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

[20:37] So the people are disciplined. And finally, we end with a very, very uneasy truce. we're really not sure what's going to happen. Are they going to be punished more, or is it okay now?

Well, this is what Moses says in verse 30, you have sinned a great sin, but now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sins.

So that is, there's been some discipline, but that hasn't been the real punishment. They still need some atonement. And Moses has a plan. So he goes to the Lord and says, alas, this people has sinned a great sin.

They've made for themselves gods of gold. But now, and here's the plan, if you will only forgive their sin, but if not, blot me out of the book you have written.

So Moses offers himself for an atonement. He offers himself on behalf of the people. But Moses is actually not able to do that.

[21 : 39] He doesn't, he's not like Jesus Christ. who is fully God and fully man, who on the cross can make an atonement for all God's people. Moses can't put himself in that place.

Moses himself is a sinner, whereas Jesus, he was sinless in his atonement. And so God says, whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.

But now go, lead the people to the place which I have spoken to you. That's good, that's my promise. My angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.

So we have a very, very uneasy truce. God has said, I'll keep my promise. We will go to the promised land. I've got a commitment to this people.

But hanging over their heads, in other words, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them. So God makes a commitment to mercy and a commitment to punishment. And you wonder, which of these two commitments will triumph?

[22 : 45] Will it be the commitment to mercy or will it be the commitment to punishment? How much longer can God go showing forbearance against this idolatry?

How long will his patience last? How could he pass over such blatant sin? I mean, really, he should judge them all. How can he do that? Well, friends, this is how the New Testament describes the blood of Jesus.

It really connects very well to Exodus 32, Romans 3. God put forward his son as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

Jesus Christ's death is the atonement that Moses wanted. He didn't know about it. He tried to do it himself in a way. In a way that foreshadowed the cross.

But Jesus Christ is the one who brings atonement by his blood. He did this, God did this to show his righteousness in Romans 3, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.

[23 : 58] It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. So a day did come when Israel's sins were punished.

The Easter day, God kept his word and he punished them for their sin, but not the people, but he punished his one and only son. That's the day on which our sins are punished.

It's a day of mercy and a day of punishment. punishment. Friends, the reason God tolerates us, the reason God forgives us is because of the cross of Christ, because of the beautiful cross of Christ.

The only reason in a sense that he does not destroy us for our idolatry even today is because of the cross of Christ. It's such a beautiful thing that God has found a way to be both just and a justifier and a forgiver.

It's a great thing because we are an idolatrous people and we need to plead the blood of Christ for forgiveness. Friends, the command of God to us today is to worship him alone, is to serve him alone, to find and search out those idols and to destroy them and to shun them and some of them are persistent, so we just need to keep fighting them.

[25 : 31] And every time we fall, we are to come in confession and to plead the blood of Christ and the mercy of God. We deserve judgment, we deserve eternal judgment, but the gift of God is that we are forgiven through the blood of his son and that's a wonderful gift.

Friends, I'll leave with you that challenge to worship him alone and to plead the blood of his son alone. Let's do that. Lord God, we want to worship you alone.

We hate the fact that our hearts, we give ourselves over to idols all the time. We hate that we are so vulnerable to them and we so quickly worship things other than you and trust and hope in things other than you.

Please, dear Father, forgive us. Please forgive us, not because we deserve it, but forgive us through the blood of Christ for your own glory. Forgive us through his atonement.

Thank you for passing over our sins and thank you for putting them onto your son. We desperately need him so much and so Father, by the power of your spirit, help us to live for you alone.

[26 : 42] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.