

# Heartbreak

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if you would like to take your Bibles and open to Exodus 32, it's on page 76.

My oldest niece is a formidable young woman, a brilliant drama teacher, and was an extraordinarily precocious child.

Before she was three, she discovered the one word that would make any doting relative give her exactly what she wanted, and it was the word need.

And I can remember shopping with her with Bron, and we'd put her up in the trolley before the age of three, and we'd be running down one of the store aisles, and there'd be this dreadful candy, which they always put at child height, and she would point at the candy and she would say, I just need one.

Not I want, but I need. Now, that's a great picture of what's going on here in Exodus 32, because what we want and what we need are very different things, and we often give up what we need so that we might get what we want.

[ 1 : 17 ] Look at verse 1. The people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain. They said to Aaron, up. What was he doing lying down? Make us gods who go before us.

This Moses, forget about him. In verse 6, they rose up early on the morrow, offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play without their clothes on.

Now, of course, we're far too sophisticated to do this today, aren't we? We would never take a cow and put gold all over it and bow down and worship it. But I just want to remind you where this story comes.

We are in the book of Exodus, and the book of Exodus is all about the glory of God, the revealing of God's glory through redeeming his people, bringing them to himself and dwelling with them.

We've said again and again, it's a rehearsal, the great salvation we have in Jesus Christ, where God wants us to participate in his glory. These are not pagan people.

[ 2 : 23 ] They're people who've been redeemed. They've seen the power of God's outstretched arm. They've been rescued from slavery. They've heard his voice. They've seen his glory. And that's the point, you see.

The worship of the golden calf is what we as believers do. We all do it. For everyone who's bound to God by covenant. This is about the most basic and fundamental temptation that we as believers face all the time, and that is to make God in our own image.

It's to reject God as he really is, to exchange the true God for what we imagine or what we want.

This is the essential tendency of all Christians.

It's to worship my own idea about God. It's to resist the word of God. It's to make him the way we want. This is the sin, as we said two weeks ago, that lies underneath every other sin.

If you don't believe me, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, speaking about this episode says, These things are warnings for us not to desire evil as they did.

[ 3 : 33 ] So Exodus 32 is not an anti-bovine chapter. It's about our desires. It's about our hearts. Because idolatry is what we set our hearts on.

It's the things that we entrust ourselves to. It's the things we look to for security. We bow down and we worship them. And money, sex and power, but all sorts of good things like our reputation and being right and our success and our busyness.

The reason they chose a cow, as Dad pointed out, sorry, not Dad, Dan. Dan is a dad. You can call him father at the door if you wish.

The Egyptian, many of the Egyptian gods were cow-like. The picture that Dan had was the god Apis. And some of the Canaanite gods were like cows as well.

But it's not the external shape that's the issue. The Israelites didn't need anything external pressuring them to make these idols. It came out of their hearts. I've said this before.

[ 4 : 34 ] God could rescue their bodies out of Egypt, but taking Egypt out of their hearts, it's a very different thing, isn't it? Our hearts are perpetual factory of idols, says Calvin. The most amazing thing, I think, about this beginning of the chapter is the timing of it.

If you were with us last week, you'll know that Moses is now at the top of the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God on the tablets and all the instructions of the tabernacle.

And all the plans of the tabernacle that God is making is so that he can come and dwell with his people, making every provision for them so that his glory would be resident in all its beauty and loveliness and sacrifice and seriousness with his sinful people.

It's while God is delivering the plan, this lovely plan, out of his grace and his kindness that the people play the harlot in the valley below and build the cow.

Did you find that amazing? They can see the fire and the cloud at the top of the mountain. Every morning they get up, there's manna on the ground. The God is miraculously excited, but it doesn't make any difference whatsoever.

[ 5 : 45 ] They make the golden calf. It's a terrible irony. They make the God they want, while God is giving them who they need.

I think it is very important for us, brothers and sisters, there is something desperately, stubbornly, irrationally wicked in every one of our hearts. While God is busy making provision for us daily, we keep fashioning gods, we keep fashioning other idols.

While God is preparing for us something that is beyond our imagination, we take what our imagination makes up and bow down before it.

As he makes everything possible for us to come and dwell with us, we exchange his glory. We grab his glory, we drag it out of heaven, we remake it into the shape of a cow, and we worship it.

So there are two lessons from this chapter, and we're going to accelerate through it twice today.

And the first lesson is this. We need a much better high priest than Aaron.

[ 6 : 54 ] Aaron is Moses' older brother. And do you remember when Moses went up the mountain, he said to the 70 elders, I'm putting Aaron in charge. Everything goes through him.

He is now the spiritual leader of Israel. This guy is meant to be the high priest. I checked on the computer that during the description of the tabernacle, God mentions Aaron 39 times in those seven chapters.

God has a big plan for Aaron. Now what would you expect Aaron, the spiritual leader of God's people to say, when the people come to him and say, make us gods?

Don't you think he should have said to them, you must be joking. That is absolute defiance and disobedience of the first commandment. You cannot be serious. You were with me when we saw the glory of God on the mountain.

You heard him say the Ten Commandments, just as I did. Remember back in chapter 19, you said, all that the Lord has spoken, we will do. And in chapter 23, you said, chapter 24, all the words that the Lord has spoken, we will do.

[ 8 : 02 ] And you said it again in chapter 24. And then you and I were all sealed with the blood of the covenant. And I was one of the lucky ones. I went up with 70 elders on the mountain and I sat down and ate and drank with God.

And I saw his glory. This is a wicked thing to do. Surely he should say that. I, as the leader of Israel, I want to stand with the word of God. I know it looks attractive and popular, but it will only lead to death.

Something like that. But instead he does what every Christian leader has done at some time or other. He chooses the favor of the people over the glory of God.

Down to verse 2. Aaron said, take the rings of gold that are on your ears of your wives and your sons and your daughters. Bring them to me. Verse 4. With a graving tool, he fashioned it into a molten calf and they said, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

And then Aaron says, verse 5, tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord. It is a stunning failure of the leadership of the high priest of Israel. And Aaron now becomes the patron saint of pragmatism.

[ 9 : 13 ] He gives in to popular demand to save his own skin and develops a whole new philosophy of leadership called leading from behind. You ought to know better.

Democracy has been a disaster in spiritual decisions. It was in the garden. It was at the time of the flood. And here it is in this hugely popular decision. It's a great wickedness.

And the only way he can do this is by compromising the word of God, by choosing what is popular over what is right. Because the fear of the people are driving him and that's more important to him than the vision of God's glory.

So he devises a slimy scheme to cover over his tracks. He baptises what they're doing with religious jargon. He wallpapers over their wickedness by open deception.

He calls this an offering before the Lord. And he says, okay, let's make this idol out of gold and let's put it in part of our liturgy. Verse 4, and we're going to rewrite the creed. We believe in one cow who brought us out of Egypt.

[10:20] This is the way false religion works. There's always something deceptive about it. It has the appearance of truth and validity, the veneer of spiritual reality.

And you can go to all kinds of churches right across the spectrum today, which baptise what we want in the clothing of Christian jargon.

You can go to a church where the liturgy will be followed closely. But what is said about God and what is believed about Jesus may not be true. And the tragedy is that you can go to a church and have what you want and never really know it until we open God's word and work through it together. And I think we need to pray for ourselves. This is my natural drift. It's to prefer your opinion over God's. And it's your natural drift as well. And the best way to make an idol is to take what you want and to dress it up as though it's legitimate.

And every spiritual compromise we make robs us of spiritual power because we make gods that are more congenial and more convenient, that won't make demands on us, that are not holy.

[11:32] Oh yes, they'll have the veneer of religious observance. And I think this cow is a brilliant picture of all our idols because the cow lets us do what we want. The cow isn't going to call us to account.

It's never going to judge us. Like every idol and every attempt to replace God, it's completely useless and it cannot save us.

So Aaron, he doesn't pray. He doesn't say, look, let me get the 70 elders. We'll see God's face. He capitulates to the popular agenda. And the high priest of Israel now allows the audience to be sovereign and not God's glory.

You can hear the shock and exasperation when Moses confronts him in verse 21. Just look down on the right-hand side of page 21.

What did these people do to you that you brought such a great sin upon them? I mean, what did they threaten you with? Did they take your children out and hold them over a fire? And at this point, Aaron should have fessed up, shouldn't he?

[12:36] But he does the opposite. And if you want an object lesson in how not to fess up, if you're planning to avoid fessing up to something, here is a brilliant model to follow, Aaron.

Okay, three steps. Number one, verse 22, he says, Moses, back off. Don't get so upset. No big deal. Problem's not with me, it's with you.

You need to loosen up. Don't make such a big deal about sin. What is your problem? Step one.

Step two, he blames the people. Verse 23. The people made me do it.

My needs are not being taken care of. I just couldn't trust God. And then step three. Step three is called spin. Verse 24.

This is a great verse. I said to them, let any who have gold take it off. So they gave it to me, and I threw it in the fire and I came to this beautiful cow.

[13:35] The only way we can minimize the reality of our sin is as we minimize the truth and we minimize the glory of God. And then we come to this deeply sober passage.

Verse 26. Moses, who had come back down by now, stood at the gate of the camp and said, who is on the Lord's side? Come to me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them, thus says the Lord God of Israel, this is God's idea, it's not Moses, put every man his sword on his side and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp and slay every man his brother and every man his companion and every man his neighbor.

And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses and there fell of the people that day about three thousand. Now at one level, it's a deeply shocking passage, isn't it?

I mean, doesn't it show that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and we much prefer the message of love from Jesus. And aren't the Levites disobeying one of the Ten Commandments that God just gave?

David, this is a very embarrassing passage. Let's move on quickly and pretend it's not there, shall we? Let me make three very quick comments about this. The first is to say that if you say this is religious cleansing and genocide that God is guilty of, I think that's completely superficial and misleading.

[15:02] This is the first time in history that God has given the execution of judgment into the hands of his people. Until now, God is the one who directly brings judgment.

He does in the flood, he does in the plagues, in the Red Sea. But for a time, a limited time in God's economy, he placed the execution of his, God's judgment into the hands of his people and that prerogative was withdrawn when Jesus came.

You'll be very glad to know. Secondly, if God had justice only on his mind, how many of the Israelites would have survived?

Verse 3, they were all guilty of breaking the covenant. They had all been sealed with the blood of the covenant and the wages of sin is death. I think what's remarkable is we need to look at this and say how many people survived.

I mean, we know that 600,000 left Egypt. Those who were killed are a tiny fraction. And even before the execution begins, Moses gives every single person in Israel a chance to repent and he says, come, who's on the Lord's side?

[16:17] The Lord God, the sovereign maker of the world who gave them life in the first place and had rescued them from slavery is doing what is right and doing what is gracious.

If we ask for justice, none of us can stand before him. This is a picture of God restraining judgment and exercising his mercy which is completely undeserving. That's the second thing to say.

But the third thing to say is probably more important. You see, our problem with this passage is much more basic. And I think it's no accident that this little episode comes in the chapter on the golden calf because it challenges where our true loyalty lies.

This passage comes out and it says, do you count the glory of God as more important and more weighty than the lives of 3,000 undeserving human beings?

Are you more offended by what happened in the first six verses in the idolatry and the offense for God's glory or are you more offended by what happens here in 25 to 29?

[17:29] If you are more offended by the killing of the 3,000, you have made God in your own image. If you think you are more compassionate than God or your ethics are better than God's, you may as well bow to the cow.

You have not come to see yet the weight of God's glory. We need a much better high priest than Aaron. God's people need shepherds and priests that will try and run them away from sin, not back into sin.

We need a high priest and we need leaders who have a feel for the glory of God and they prefer God's glory to their own reputation or popularity.

We need a better high priest than Aaron. And secondly, and very briefly, we need a better mediator than Moses. Now, the key to this chapter, I think, is not so much the car for Aaron, but it's a conversation between God and Moses up on the mountain.

Because while Aaron is fashioning this idol in the valley, God is fashioning a mediator up on the mountain. If we go back up to verse 7, while Moses is still up on the mountain, God announces to him what's going on in the valley.

[18:47] He's just spent these chapters describing the beauty of the tabernacle and you can feel the heartbreak in verse 7. He says, go down, your people who you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.

This is the first time God said, until now, they're my people, let my people go. Now they're your people, he says, they've turned aside quickly out of the way I commanded them. They've made for themselves a molten calf, worshipped it, sacrificed, saying, these are your gods.

Verse 9, I've seen these people, they're stiff-necked people. Now, he says, let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, but of you I will make a great nation. It looks like the whole plan of Exodus is up in smoke, doesn't it? The question for us is, why does God say this to Moses? Why does he tell him this? Think about this with me.

If God had decided to destroy Israel, it would have happened, wouldn't it? His plan is to save Israel and to make Moses a mediator in the process.

[ 19 : 54 ] This is quite brilliant. See, when he says to Moses, let me alone that I might consume them, he's not a little child, a petulant child who can't get past Moses, let me buy Moses so that I might destroy them.

It's not that God is reluctant to do good, what he's doing is he wants to do good and he wants to include Moses in the doing of the good. He is inviting Moses to step into the role of mediator.

He's holding back his righteous judgment. In a sense, he's putting the future of Israel in Moses' hands and the only reason he tells Moses is he wishes Moses to pray and that's what happens. And we read that the Lord has compassion, not repent, he has compassion on his people and Moses grows as mediator. And that's why the chapter finishes in this lovely way.

Moses comes down the mountain, he smashes the commandments, he sees what's going on and he feels now as God does. The covenant, it's smashed and shattered and he takes the idol and he grinds it up and pours it on the water and makes them drink it because that's what our idols are worth.

[ 21 : 07 ] And what hope is there? Verse 30, On the morrow, Moses said to the people, You have sinned a great sin. I'll go up to the Lord, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.

And Moses returned to the Lord and he said, Alas, this people have sinned a great sin. They have made themselves gods of gold but now if thou wilt forgive their sin, if not, blot me, I pray, out of the book which thou hast written.

But the Lord said, Whoever has sinned against me, him I will blot out of my book. We don't have time to look at this in detail. This opens the door for the next two chapters which we're going to look at next week but it's a wonderful prayer.

Moses offers his own life in exchange for the lives of the people but of course he cannot atone for their sins for two very good reasons. One is, he's a sinful person and second, he's only a human being, just one human being.

But what is wonderful about that little prayer at the end of the chapter is that Moses has begun to understand the structure of salvation that God will put away the sin of his people but it's going to take the substitution of a greater mediator than Moses.

[ 22 : 26 ] We need a better mediator. We need someone who has come into the world without sin, who's lived a life and faced all our temptations without disobedience, who's obeyed the Ten Commandments, who's chosen the glory of God and we need a man, a human, who is also divine, his life is eternal so that when he substitutes for us in his death, the extent of that substitution can cover every man and woman who comes to him.

That's the gospel. It's the happy good news which is at the heart of the scriptures that the same God who is revealed here in the Exodus has sent his son into the world and he has become our high priest and he has become our mediator.

Praise him. I want to finish by you reading to me a passage from Hebrews. So I wonder if you just turn right, if you have your Bible open, to Hebrews chapter 9.

This is a very big sentence and it pulls all sorts of things together out of our passage. Hebrews 9 and I wonder if we'd read together verses 11 through all the way to 15.

It's quite a long passage but and heifer is another word for bull and so verses 11 to 15 of Hebrews 9. But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come sanctified homes of Word practice and to pray we should lead to all finding the Genesis and the Bibles in dice and they in their eyes and for their sinful love and the devil for the and adesso of the and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh.

[ 24 : 29 ] How much more shall the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offer himself without the flesh to God. Purify your conscience from dead poor souls to serve the living world.

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance since the death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions of the other.

That's an amazing last verse. All the sins of the old covenant are covered until Jesus comes and he comes from heaven as our great high priest and he bears all the glory of God in his person and as he goes to the cross he makes a new covenant, a better covenant which is able to wash us inwardly from all our idols.

He is a great mediator, he is a great high priest and our only hope, and my question is, have you placed your confidence in him? Do you continue to put your trust and your boldness in him? That's what we need to do. So let's approach the throne of grace together in his name. I invite you to kneel. I'm going to lead us in prayer. Amen.