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Exodus 32

God's Exodus People: The Problem of Idolatry

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Jack works for a local telecommunications company. He tells his friends he loves his job, his company, and his boss. But if you were to follow Jack for a week, you would notice something is off. On average, he arrives 15 minutes late to work and leaves 15 minutes early. Sometimes he takes office supplies home, like when he needs a pen or highlighter. When he sits at his desk, he has one screen on his work, and one screen open to Facebook and Sports Center. He takes an extra long lunch break, and never steps outside of his cubicle just to say hi to his coworkers. If you were to ask him if he likes his job, he would say, "Absolutely, wouldn't trade it for the world," but secretly, he's following all of the job boards.

The story of Jack is a parable, it's an analogy for our relationship with God. Let me tell you the story again. Jack is a Christian. If you were to talk to Jack after church, he would say he loves church, Jesus, and God. But if you were to follow Jack for a week, you would notice something is off. On average, he doesn't pray and his Bible is collecting dust—someone has written "read me" on its cover. He calls the church he attends his church, but he only goes if something else doesn't pop up. And when he does attend, he's an audience member, not a participant. He doesn't have any friends there, and doesn't volunteer or join a small group. If you were to ask Jack if he loves God, he would say, "Absolutely!" But does he really?

Jack has a problem. His words tell one story, "I love God" but his actions tell a different story, "other things are more important to me than God." The problem Jack has is called... **idolatry**. Idolatry is "anything we put above God." It's anytime we put God second. When you think of idolatry, your first response is to probably think, "That doesn't apply to me." I don't burn incense to a **figurine**. I don't give offerings in temples. Idolatry is expressed those ways in many cultures, but at its core, idolatry is putting me first.

Some of you may remember my sermon on [The Ten Commandments](#) from a few weeks ago. I taught you how to remember all ten commandments. Do you recall how to remember the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me? You point your **pointer finger** into the sky and remember to put God first and that there are no other Gods but the one true God. Do you remember the second commandment? You remember it with the **number 2** and how a two looks like a bowing person or a tiny idol. The second commandment is, you shall not make for yourself an image. An image is an idol.

The first two commandments God gave the Israelites in Exodus 20 are no God but me and no idols. By Exodus 32, the Israelites have already broken both commandments when they worship the golden calf. Today I want to address the problem of idolatry with three questions: **1) Why do we commit idolatry? 2) What are the consequences of idolatry? And 3) How can we overcome and have hope?**

1) Why do we commit idolatry? (Ex 32:1-9)

Why do the Israelites put God second? Think of everything God has done for them. He delivered all **two million** of them from slavery in Egypt through ten supernatural plagues. Then he lead them to the Red Sea where the people thought they would perish, and supernaturally delivers them by parting the waters and they

walk across on dry land. Then God delivers them from dehydration and starvation in the wilderness by providing water and manna from heaven.

But if that isn't enough, God says the Israelites will be his people and he will be their God (Ex 6:7). God and Israel will have a special relationship no other nation has. Throughout the Old Testament God compares their relationship to a marriage. God is their husband and they are his wife. God says, "Here's a list of expectations you need to follow to be in relationship with me, the ten commandments and the law." And in Exodus 24 the Israelites say, "We agree." These are their **wedding vows**. In fact, in Exodus 24, the leaders of Israel and God have a type of wedding feast to celebrate this new relationship (Ex 24:9-11). It's a special **covenant relationship**. *A covenant is a promise where God is involved.* God and Israel are married.

At the end of the feast, God calls Moses up mount Sinai to receive the law written on tablets. Moses is up there for 40 days, and it's during this time, literally right after Israel's wedding to God, that Israel cheats on God with a golden calf. Can you imagine that happening at a wedding you attend? A man and woman get married, celebrate the party, then one of them cheats on the **Honeymoon**. It's terrible, but this is what Israel does. *But it's also what we do if we call ourselves Christian but don't put God first in our lives.*

We commit idolatry because of spiritual adultery. (v. 2,6)

The Israelites come to Aaron, the chief priest, and say, "Moses seems to not be coming back, make us gods we can see and worship." (v. 1) So what does Aaron do? He says, "Take off the wedding gifts God gave you and we'll use them to pay for your spiritual adultery." Do you remember where the Israelites got the gold rings? They were slaves in Egypt for 400 years. They didn't buy them. God gave them to them as a gift as they left Egypt when they **plundered the Egyptians** (Ex 3:22). The Israelites are taking a sign of God's love for them, their wedding gifts they're supposed to use for the tabernacle, melting them down, and making them into an idol. *This is like pawning your wedding ring to pay for your affair.*

Then the Israelites consummate their new relationship with this foreign god. Verse 6 says, "the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." The word for "play" here implies sexual misconduct. They got drunk and they slept around. *They demonstrated their spiritual adultery with physical adultery.*

Christians can also commit idolatry through spiritual adultery, by not prioritizing God in our lives. How can we know if this is the case? I've brought a true or false quiz, a self assessment.

1. **True or False. I always trust God, no matter what's going on in my life.** The Israelites stop trusting God because they can't see what he's doing. But we never make that mistake, right?
2. **True or False. I never try and make God do the things I want.** The Israelites turned God into a golden calf so they could control him and tell him what to do. But we never do that, right?
3. **True or False. I worship the God revealed in the Bible, not the God I imagine him to be.** Israel created their dream God, and that made it a lot easier to believe. But we never do that, right?
4. **True or False. I always put God first, even when it's inconvenient.** God brought Israel into the desert and abandoned them, so they try a more convenient way. But we wouldn't do that, right?

To pass this quiz, you have to get all four answers true. I didn't pass this quiz. I got a big fat "F." I failed. There are days I pass the test, but I never always pass the test. When Israel fails, the results are disastrous.

2) What are the consequences of idolatry? (Ex 32:10, 15-20, 25-29, 35)

Do you remember how Jesus summarizes the Old Testament law? The law can be summarized as “loving God” and “loving neighbor” (Matt 22:37-40). So if the Israelites have already broken the first two commandments, this sin will produce a result that is counter to loving God and loving neighbor.

Spiritual Ruin (v. 10, 15-20, 35)

Idolatry leads to spiritual ruin. We see this theme appear several ways in the story.

First, when Israel makes this golden calf and worships it, God is so angry he threatens to destroy them (v. 10). They are at spiritual odds with God. Idolatry leads to separation from God’s love, which is what spiritual ruin is.

Second, when Moses comes down the mountain, he throws the tablets that have the law written on them on the ground, breaking them. He’s illustrating the Israelites have broken their wedding vows, their covenant relationship with God. They're not acting like God's wife, but his enemy.

Third, Moses takes the golden calf, grinds it up, pours it in water, and makes them drink it. Moses literally wants the golden calf to pass through their digestive system so that they can see what their religion looks like at the end of the day. That's a bit gross, but it's true.

Spiritual ruin only leads one place, destruction. God promises that he is one day going to judge everyone who commits idolatry. **Colossians 3:5-6** says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.” (NIV®) God is warning us today that any who choose to live lives of idolatry, of cheating spiritually on God, of putting the things of this life before him, will one day face final and unchangeable destruction by God. That’s God’s wrath. *Idolatry leads to spiritual ruin.*

Relational Ruin (v. 25-29)

Idolatry leads to relational ruin. We see the relational ruin that comes upon the Israelites because they don't love God first. Moses calls out, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me” (v. 26) and the Levites gather around him. The levites are the priestly tribe, the ones who will serve God in the tabernacle. Moses tells them to take their swords and kill a **brother**, a **friend**, and a **neighbor** (v. 27). They kill these people they love, and three thousand men die (v. 28). Moses is demonstrating the ruin spiritual adultery has on not just an individual’s soul, but on a **whole community**.

We experience the affects of idolatry every day. Our **culture’s dream** is to acquire as much wealth, success, and power as possible, not a relationship with the God who can satisfy our souls. That’s greed, and it’s lead to both the oppression of the poor and the unhappiness of those who have it all. Our culture says to put **self first**. When we put our needs and wants first, those inevitably end up in conflict with someone else’s needs and wants. Next week we’re starting a new series called Conflict & Peacemaking. One author on this topic says, conflict is always caused by idolatry, by putting my desires before what God wants.

If we’re not loving God first, we’re putting someone or something in his place, and no matter how good that someone or something is, they’ll eventually let us down. When we choose to have a relationship with someone in a way that we know doesn’t please God, we’re now **idolizing that person**. We’re saying, “That person can make me happy more than the God who created me.” It won't work. No matter how much Monica wants me to be perfect, I never will be. No matter how much I want Monica to be perfect, she always will be. What enables us to love others the way they need to be loved, is by loving God first.

Idolatry leads to spiritual and relational ruin. Are you feeling a little down or depressed? I've just said we all commit idolatry and the consequence of it is destruction. This means we're all in trouble, but there's hope.

3) How can we overcome and have hope? (Ex 32:11-14, 21-24, 30-34)

Exodus 32 comes just a couple chapters after we learned about the priesthood. A priest is a mediator who intercedes. A **mediator** is defined as “Someone who brings two enemies together and makes it possible for them to be friends again.” In the documentary **As We Forgive**, which we watched last night as a church, a mediator brings together the Hutu perpetrator with the daughter of one of his Tutsi victims to find forgiveness and healing. A mediator may also **intercede**, which is “to speak on someone else’s behalf.” Right after the people sin, Moses intercedes as a mediator for them to God. They’ve cheated on God and the consequence is destruction, but Moses asks for mercy, and in so doing, shows us the solution to idolatry.

Remember God’s faithfulness. (v. 11-14)

Remember who he is. Moses cries out to God, arguing that God brought the Israelites out of Egypt for a reason. He brought them out to show his “great power” over the false gods of Egypt (Ex 12:12, 32:11). If he destroys the Israelites, all that means nothing. The foreign nations, who Israel is supposed to be a light to, will say not that the God of the Israelites is good, but that he is evil (Ex 19:6). And he will have forsaken his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make their descendants a numerous people, and through them to bring salvation to the world (Gen 12:1-3). *Moses reminds himself and God of God’s faithfulness.*

When we’re tempted to put things, people, or experiences above God, remember God is good and he cares for us. Even if he seems to have abandoned us, he hasn’t. Chris has a great line he shared at the preaching breakfast this week, “When you can’t see God’s hand, trust his heart.” When he’s asking us to give up something that’s really precious, like a relationship that doesn’t honor him, or a sin habit that we know isn’t healthy, he promises to give us something far better in return, himself. *Remember God’s faithfulness.*

Worship God for who He is. (v. 21)

The solution to idolatry is worshipping God. But we don't worship the God of our imaginations, but the good but hard God of the Bible. Aaron actually says the golden calf is "Yahweh" (v. 5). He tries to turn the true God into a lifeless God who can't harm anyone or do anything. That's what we do when we ignore the tough teachings of the Bible, or say we don't agree with them.

If you're really wrestling with a hard truth found in Scripture, like God's design for marriage to only be between a man or woman, or that Christianity claims to be the only way to God, then I want to challenge you to draw near to God by studying his words. God doesn't mind us wrestling with him and wrestling with the hard truths of Scripture; but he does mind it when we try to change who he is into something he's not. Monica was the featured speaker at her high-school's fundraising gala on Thursday night. Her main point was that her school is a place where students can safely wrestle openly and honestly with the Scriptures and who God is. I want Cornerstone to be known for the exact same thing. *Worship God for who he is.*

Ownership of sin. (v. 22-24)

We remember who we are. How does Aaron respond when Moses confronts him? He blames Moses, “Don’t get mad. This isn’t a big deal.” He blames the Israelites, “These people are evil.” And he blames the golden calf, “I threw gold into the fire, and out came this calf!” Aaron is the high priest who is supposed to be the

first to ask God for forgiveness, but instead he blames others. He's not interceding, he's not mediating. He's running away from the problem. If we want to overcome our idols, we have to admit we have idols.

Out of our repentance can come a deeper, truer, realer faith. When I was a teenager, I believed in God, but I didn't put him first. I disobeyed God with alcohol and pornography, which is not so different from the partiers at Mount Sinai. It wasn't until I confessed my sins to my parents that I was finally set free. But it was out of this moment, one of the darkest moments in my life, that faith sprang up. **Acts 3:19-20a** says, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord..." (ESV) I don't know what it is about repentance. When we hold onto our idols, it's like we're crouched over them tight. But when we let go, it's like we burst forth, growing in leaps and bounds because we've been waiting to grow for so long.

To overcome our idols, we remember God's faithfulness, worship God for who he is, take ownership of our sins, and finally, what we need the most, a savior.

A substitute Savior. (30-34)

We need a substitute Savior. Moses, at the end of our story, does something beautiful. **Exodus 32:30** says, "The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." (NIV®) **Atoning** is defined as "providing a way of coming back into friendship with someone." Moses not only mediates, and intercedes, he also wants to try to atone for their sins. He wants to pay God back for the wrong they've done.

How does Moses try to atone for their sins? **Exodus 32:32** says, "But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." (NIV®) In other words, "God, forgive them at the cost of my own soul. I'm willing to perish if you'll save these people." Moses offers to take their place as a **substitute**. Moses loves his people. He is a good mediator, but honestly, he's not good enough. He's a sinner. You can only pay for the sins of others if you don't have any sin. So God turns Moses down.

Moses is showing the solution to all of our idolatry. Since none of us are perfect, all of us will commit spiritual adultery on God in our lives, we need a substitute savior. We need someone to have their name **blotted out** so that our names won't be. That person has to be perfect. That person is Jesus.

When Jesus goes to the cross, he takes the spiritual and relational ruin we deserve. When Jesus is hanging on the cross he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46) Usually Jesus calls God his Father, but here we see the Father forsaking the Son, which is a turning away, an abandonment. Jesus was abandoned by the Father so we never are. The sword fell on Jesus so it doesn't fall on us (Acts 2:41). Jesus consumes our idols so they don't consume us. Jesus' name is blotted out so that our names are written in permanent ink. Because God's wrath fell on Christ, we live (1 Thess 1:9-10). *We need a substitute savior.*

Lay down your idols at the foot of the cross.

I want to tell you the story of Jack one more time. Jack realizes he's been living a lie. He says he loves God but he doesn't live that way. And so he goes home, finds a place where he can pray by himself, he gets down on his knees, and he confesses. He confesses his complete failure to **love God first**, and how that shows up in him never praying, reading his Bible, and his spotty church attendance. He confesses that he hasn't loved his neighbor well either, that all in all, he's failed to put Jesus Christ above all else.

But his prayer doesn't stop there. See, then Jack confesses the complete success of Christ to put the Father first, to pray, the complete success of Christ to read the Scriptures, the complete success of Christ to love his bride, the church, how he died for her sins on the cross and then rose in victory over the grave. Jack is remembering God's faithfulness and he is worshipping God for who he has revealed himself to be through Jesus Christ. Then Jack thanks Christ for being his substitute, for saving him.

Jack is laying down his idols at the foot of the cross. Then Jack asks God to help him live like Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. He asks God to crucify his idols day by day and put God first in his life, even when it's hard. Jack has confessed his idols, confessed the victory of Christ, and asked God to help him. And when Jack leaves that room, he leaves it refreshed. *Lay down your idols at the foot of the cross.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).