

The Tragedy of Idolatry

Exodus 32:1-25

The story before us this morning is often described as the Fall of Israel, an echo of that first fall of humanity in Genesis 3. I think for good reasons. In Genesis 1-2, God creates humanity in his image to have a special relationship with them. He relates to Adam and Eve as his children, he resources them with everything they can ever need. He resides with them in the Garden, where he comes down to walk and talk with them in the cool of the day. He rules them as their king, instructing them by his Word on how to live as his children, in his presence, for his glory. And yet you're barely into the story before Adam and Eve blow up their lives by rebelling against God, ruining their relationship, and forfeiting his presence and his blessing.

What we've been beholding in the story of Exodus the past several weeks is in many ways the creation story of Israel. God rescues a people who relate to him as his children—"Israel is my firstborn son," he says in ch. 4. He resources them with everything they need—bread from heaven and water from the rock, as they make their way to a land flowing with milk and honey. He rules them as their king, making a covenant with them, giving them his Law and promising that he will be their God, and they will be his people. And he just finished giving Moses plans for the tabernacle, so that he can reside with them as their God, making his glory known to them and through them. It's the creation story all over again, but writ small in one particular people, Israel, through whom God will reclaim his vision for the world, blessing all peoples and filling the whole earth with his glory.

And yet before Israel even steps a foot beyond Sinai, they blow up their lives by rebelling against God, breaking the covenant they just made, ruining their relationship, and, it would appear, forfeiting God's presence and his blessing. It's like they have committed adultery against God. In fact, that's exactly how the Bible describes idolatry—spiritual adultery.¹ Israel was wed to God in a covenant ceremony in ch. 24, a promise and pledge to be devoted exclusively to him for all generations. But while Moses is up on the mountain with God, receiving blueprints for their dream house, if you will, in just 40 days Israel is already sleeping around.

This story is a tragedy. But it's a tragedy that hits close to home for all of us. Because while we may not in this time and place be tempted to pick up a chisel and carve for ourselves a god, that doesn't mean we're not tempted and often guilty of replacing God, or reducing him to something we can control. Especially when we can't see him at work or understand what he's doing.

And so as we consider the story before us—the fall of Israel, the golden calf—and think about the roots of idolatry, the nature of it, the consequences for it, and the remedy we have in Christ,

¹ E.g., Jdgs. 8:33; Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:6-10; Ezek. 16; Hos. 1-3; Jms. 4:4.

don't disconnect yourself from this story. This is our story, like it or not. And it is a tragedy. But it's only when we understand the tragedy, that we appreciate the remedy and the hope we have in Christ.

So first, the roots of idolatry . . .

The Roots of Idolatry: Fear and Control

When we last left off with the people of Israel, we saw them in ch. 24, pledging themselves to the covenant God was making with them. "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (24:7). What would possess them to so quickly discard the incredible promise and relationship God just made with them? They had it so good. Two words: *fear* and *control*. Exodus 32:1: "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.'"

The Israelites were afraid. Moses, the man who led them out of Egypt, the man through whom God had worked so many incredible miracles, was missing. He went up onto the mountain of God nearly forty days ago, into the fire and cloud and thunder they were so afraid of, and no one has seen him since. They can't see what God's doing. They don't understand the delay. And so they are now afraid that God is no longer going to make good on his promises, specifically, the promise to bring them into the land.

And so they decide to take matters into their own hands. Their fear produces a need for control. We can't see this God. We don't know if he's with us or not. The only way we knew that before was through Moses, and he's gone. We need a god who is with us right here, right now, so we can know whether he is in the camp. We need a god we can keep tabs on. And so they say to Aaron, "Make us gods who shall go before us."

When you can't see God at work, or don't understand what he's doing, it's really easy to doubt his presence, to doubt his power, his goodness, his faithfulness to his promises, to fear his absence, and therefore to look for more expedient means of getting what we want. To replace God, or reduce him to something we can control.

Now the irony, of course, is that while they are plotting their mutiny over God's absence, the LORD is on the mountain giving Moses plans so that he can dwell with them in a special way. In fact, the author here wants us to see a contrast between God's plan to dwell with his people, and the peoples' plan to *make* God dwell there. One author summarizes it like this:

- (1) The people seek to create what God already provided;
- (2) they, rather than God, take the initiative;
- (3) offerings are demanded rather than willingly presented;
- (4) the elaborate preparations are missing altogether;
- (5) the painstaking length of time needed for building becomes an overnight rush job;
- (6) the careful provision for guarding the presence of the Holy One turns into an open-air object of immediate accessibility;
- (7) the invisible, intangible God becomes a visible, tangible image; and
- (8) the personal, active God becomes

an impersonal object that cannot see or speak or act. The ironic effect is that they people forfeit the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves.²

And that shows you the foolishness of idolatry. So often we're after the very thing God wants to give us. But we want it on our terms and according to our timetable. We're unwilling to trust God to be God, especially in the midst of crisis, and so we look for a substitute or a surrogate.

And that brings us to the nature of idolatry. Just what is Israel doing that God finds so offensive?

The Nature of Idolatry

Scholars differ on whether Israel is breaking the first commandment (you shall have no other gods before me), the second commandment (you shall not make for yourself a graven image), or both. We often assume it's the first—that Israel is inventing a new god to replace Yahweh or come alongside him. But that's not what the story suggests. As soon as Aaron is done fashioning the idol with a graving tool (a clear violation of the second commandment), notice what the people say: "These are your gods, O Israel, *who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*" (32:4). And then Aaron builds an altar and makes a proclamation in v. 5, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD"—Yahweh, Israel's God.³

Idolatry often attempts to replace God, but in this case, Israel's not trying to replace him. They are trying to *reduce* him to something they can control—something they can see and manipulate and have immediate access to—an image. It's the second commandment that they violate here.

So what's wrong with making an image? Can't a statue of God be helpful in facilitating our worship, like icons in certain traditions? The bull-calf was a common image of deity in the ancient world—a picture of strength and power. Doesn't that help us appreciate God's power?

J.I. Packer explains that in reality, "images dishonor God, for they obscure his glory." They don't just misrepresent God, picturing him as having body parts and such when he has none. The bigger problem is that they actually "conceal most, if not all, of the truth about the personal nature and character of the divine Being whom they represent."⁴ As Isaiah 40:18 says, "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?" Nothing on earth is capable of accurately displaying his glory. Again, quoting Packer, "it is not hard to see that such a symbol in fact insults [God], for what idea of his moral character, his righteousness, goodness and patience could one gather from looking at a statue of him as a bull?"⁵

More than that, "images mislead us, for they convey false ideas about God. . . . Aaron, by making an image of God in the form of a bull-calf, led the Israelites to think of him as a Being who could be worshiped acceptably by frenzied debauchery. Hence the 'festival to the LORD' which Aaron organized (Ex 32:5) became a shameful orgy. . . . to the extent to which the image fails to tell the truth about God, to that extent you will fail to worship God in truth."⁵

² *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 280-281.

³ Note also Yahweh's description in 32:8, that the offerings during the "feast to the LORD" were given to the calf. See John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 310ff.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973, 1993), 45-46.

⁵ Packer, 46-47.

But perhaps the most insidious aspect of a graven image is that it is an attempt to *reduce* God in order to control him. If we can take God out of the heaven and put him here on earth, we can make him into whatever we want him to be. We craft him according to our needs, our desires, our fears—our own personal deity, custom built for our situation. Making an image of God is our attempt at controlling God—at making him less than who he is, so that we can be all that we want to be.

And again, this is not just a problem for ancient Israel. We may not break out the hammer and chisel, but we are experts at either reducing God to whatever we want him to be. Crafting a *mental* image, if you will. Again, Packer puts his finger on this: “How often do you hear this sort of thing: ‘I *like to think* of God as . . . [fill in the blank].’ ‘I don’t think of God as a Judge; I *like to think* of him simply as a Father.’”⁶ ‘I like to think of God as the spirit and the wind and everything around us.’ ‘I like to think of him as the champion of my cause.’ Whatever it is we’re *really* worshipping, we reduce God to that image.

Which means that when you reduce God to an image, you really do replace him with something else, something less. In Israel’s effort to reduce and contain God, they replaced him with a false god. We do the same. In fact, the only way you can reduce God to an image, is if you’ve already replaced him with something else—something less than what he truly is.

Tim Keller calls this a “counterfeit god.” It’s “anything 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 you. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”⁷

And our world is full of them. Sex, money, education, success, body image, possessions, family, friends. Even good things, when you make them an ultimate thing, can become an idol. We find our life and identity and significance in them. We run to them to avoid whatever it is we fear.

But when you think about we give up in the LORD in order to chase these lesser gods, it doesn’t make sense. Nothing can compare with him. It’s as if we treat our relationship with God like a prize on gameshow. You can walk away now with the promise of an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, *or* you can spin the wheel again and take your chance at winning something better today or losing everything you have. What’s your choice? And the fear of missing out on what we think might be better, or at least more immediate and controllable, leads us to do the stupidest things. And to make stupid excuses when we get caught—like Aaron, when Moses confronts him. ‘You know how this people is set on evil. It’s their fault. All I did was throw the gold into the fire and out came this calf’ (32:21-24). It’s foolish. But in our fear and our folly, we reduce the God of heaven to something we can control on earth.

But God will not be reduced or contained. Nor will he be replaced. As he says in Isaiah 46,

To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? ⁶
Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith,
and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! ⁷ They lift it to their shoulders,

⁶ Packer, 47.

⁷ Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (NY: Dutton, 2009), xvii.

they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble. ⁸ "Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, ⁹ remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me . . . (Isa. 46:5-9)

And so what's at stake in reducing the God of heaven to something we can control on earth? It betrays our covenant with God and brings us under his judgment. This brings us to our third point . . .

The Consequences of Idolatry

What Israel does in crafting an image to represent and reduce the LORD is nothing short of spiritual adultery. They betray their covenant with God. This is how the LORD reacts, when he reports to Moses on the mountain what's happening down below. You can hear the distance in God's voice: "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" (32:7-8). And this is what Moses illustrates when he takes the two tablets of the testimony—the witness to God's covenant with Israel, engraved by God's own hand—and shatters them at the foot of the mountain (32:19). The covenant is broken before Israel even receives a copy.

And there are consequences for breaking the covenant—dire consequences. Idolatry is treason, rebellion against heaven. And God responds in wrath to all who reduce or replace him.

His initial plan, as he explains to Moses on the mountain, is simply to destroy Israel and start over with Moses. That's how big a deal this is. Moses pleads with him, appealing to him to consider his recent work of salvation and reputation among the nations, and to remember his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (32:11-14). And God relents; he does not destroy his people. But he does judge them.

First through Moses, who destroys the idol and desecrates it by turning it into Koolaid mix for the people to drink and then pass (32:20). And again through Moses, who ordains the Levites to strike down any who continue to "break loose" or run wild in covenant disobedience even after the idol is destroyed (32:25-29). And again in v. 35, as God sends a plague on the people. There are consequences for breaking the covenant.

And that often seems harsh to us. Why can't God just overlook it and extend mercy? First, because he is the only one who deserves our worship. If you lend somebody several thousand dollars to buy a car, and instead of paying you back, they give it to someone else, as though they were the ones who originated the loan, or they just decide to keep it themselves, is that right? Is that just? No. In the same way, God is the Creator, the Sustainer, the Savior and Ruler of all humanity. Everything we have comes from him, and he made us to reflect his glory. Nothing else is actually worthy of our praise or allegiance. And so idolatry not only refuses to recognize his glory, it takes the glory he deserves and gives it to something else, or steals it for ourselves. But as God says in Isaiah 42:8: "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." You cannot steal God's glory and get away with it.

But idolatry doesn't just offend God; it poisons his people. As he says in v. 7, the people have "corrupted themselves." Replacing or reducing God not only dishonors God, it destroys the lives

of his people. If you love someone, you can't sit back and say nothing when they persist in dangerous or self-destructive behavior. God's judgment is merciful in this case, stopping them from going down a road that will utterly destroy an entire people.

But here's the problem, if idolatry is just as much a problem for us today as it was for Israel then, where does that leave us? When we reduce the God of heaven to something we can control on earth, we betray our covenant with God and bring ourselves under judgment. What hope do we have?

What hope does Israel have in the story?

The Remedy for Idolatry

Our chapter doesn't fully answer that question for us. It ends with God telling Moses to lead the people into the land, and promising that his angel will go before them. But there's no mention of waiting till the tabernacle is finished before they set out, or of God going with them into the land. Israel is left in limbo at the end of ch. 32, and Navin Williams will pick up that story for us next week.

But we do see the remedy for idolatry begin to unfold. It's not something Israel can come up with on their own. It's not even enough to simply stop worshiping the idol; the damage is done and the debt must be paid. Israel's only hope is a *qualified mediator* who can stand between them and God and plead their case on their behalf.

That's the role we see Moses play in this story (and continue to play in the next couple chapters). And he plays it effectively at the beginning of the chapter. God is ready to wipe out Israel and start over with Moses, and Moses pleads their case. He doesn't deny their wrongdoing or make excuses. Once again, he appeals to God's work: you just saved them; don't throw all that work away. He appeals to his reputation: think what Egypt will say about you, how they'll slander your name. And he appeals to his promise to Abraham—you promised to make him a great nation and give his descendants the land (32:11-14). And his pleas were effective.

But at the end of the chapter, he approaches God again. This time not simply to ask for Israel's preservation, but for their forgiveness. 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.'"

And so Moses returns to the LORD. He goes back up the mountain, confessing Israel's sin and asking God to forgive it, and if not, offering himself in exchange for them. "But now, if you will forgive their sin- but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written" (32:32).

What's interesting is that it doesn't work this time. "But the LORD said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book'" (32:33). God will not destroy the people, but he will visit Israel to punish this sin, and his presence here on out is a question mark.

But even though Moses' intercession here isn't effective this time, it does hint at what it will ultimately take to remedy Israel's idolatry and ours. The kind of mediator we need. Moses may not be the right man, but he has the right idea—offering himself in exchange for the people.

Because that's exactly what it will take to deal once and for all with the idolatry of God's people—our determination to reduce the God of heaven to something we can control on earth. We need a mediator who will stand in our place, offering his righteous life for our idolatrous one, and bearing in himself the full curse for our idolatry. We need Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest, who died for our sins and rose again.

And in Jesus, we can say no to idolatry and yes to God. Listen to what the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10, reflecting on this very story in Exodus:

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." . . . Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. (1 Cor. 10:6-7, 12-14)

Because Jesus is our Mediator who reconciles us to God, and because Jesus is God, and is with us by the Holy Spirit, we don't have to give into the temptation to reduce God or replace him with something else when we're afraid. We don't have to take control. And we can't take control if we're honest. Rather, as J.I. Packer summarizes, this story is "a summons to us to recognize that God the Creator is transcendent, mysterious and inscrutable, beyond the range of any imagining or philosophical guesswork . . . and hence a summons to us to humble ourselves, to listen and learn of him, and to let him teach us what he is like and how we should think of him."⁸

Even when we can't see God, he knows what he's doing. Even when we can't understand him, we don't have to be afraid. His plan is always better than what we design for ourselves. And he will be faithful to his promise to be our God, and we his people, through Christ. So may we trust him. Not who we *want* him to be, but *who he really is*, and so walk in humble obedience through Christ.

⁸ Packer, 48.