

## Exodus 32

### Golden Calf Worship

*Up, make us gods, which shall go before us...v. 1*

Idolatry is one of those sins that can and should completely astonish us. What were those Israelites thinking? They had heard the very voice of God – a voice that moved them to fear and trembling. They had heard the very commandment from God himself that said to them *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image*. They had seen the power of God in the way he had unleashed his plagues upon Egypt and had brought them out of Egypt with a stretched out arm. They had certainly known the favor of God in the way they had been delivered from those plagues and had been provided for in the wilderness.

With such blessings and power and favor you wouldn't have thought it possible that they would sink so fast into idolatry – but here they are in the words of our text calling on Aaron to make them gods to go before them. The Psalmist in the 115<sup>th</sup> Psalm gives a vivid picture of the idols of the heathen beginning in v. 4: *Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. 5 They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: 6 They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: 7 They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat.* And then there follows a statement that shows us how idolatry can exist at all – in the very next verse of Ps. 115:8 we're told: *They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.*

Doesn't that text graphically set forth the doctrine of man's total depravity. The makers of the idols are like the idols they make insofar as they too have eyes but are spiritually blind – they have ears but are spiritually deaf – they have hands but they can do nothing for God – they have feet but they do not and cannot walk with God. They are as spiritually dead and insensitive as the idol they craft.

So we may view such sin with utter astonishment and yet our astonishment should be accompanied with humility for we too were totally depraved and we too still possess sinful natures that are vulnerable to the astonishing sin of idolatry. We do well to ask – what is really behind such a sin as this? What does such a sin look like today? Do Christians fashion images that those images may go before them? You wouldn't think so, would you? But neither would you think that these Israelites, with all that they had seen and heard and come to know about God, could fall into such crass superstition.

Could it be that the sin of idolatry is actually more subtle than we think? Could it be that we're more guilty of it than we realize? These are good questions to ponder especially if your desire is to worship God in spirit and in truth. What I'd like to do this afternoon is look at this vivid example of idolatry that we find in this chapter of Exodus and analyze it in terms of what it really looks like and what really leads to it and perhaps most importantly we want to consider what we should do about it when we do detect it. Our theme, then, this afternoon is:

## Golden Calf Worship in Modern Times

### I. What Does it Look Like?

When you think of idolatry the first thing that usually comes to mind is the worship of false gods – gods that are represented by images. If you were to look in a Bible encyclopedia or a Bible dictionary under the heading of idolatry you might see any number of statues representing various gods. Or you may read in Acts 17:23 about Paul's visit to Athens, Greece. V. 16 of that chapter tells us how Paul's spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. A few verses later he recounts to his audience in v. 23 that *as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.*

The term *devotions* is a little misleading. We generally think of devotions as a religious activity. The term here, however, refers to objects. And so another English translation renders it *as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship.* So idolatry can be associated with the worship of false gods, those false gods being represented by images. In our text in Exodus 32 the Israelites were calling for the making of false gods by the use of an image of a golden calf.

So we read their demand upon Aaron – *Up, make us gods, which shall go before us.* What is most striking in the passage, however, is that once Aaron actually fashions this false god he chooses to apply a different interpretation to it. Look at what he says in v. 5 *And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.*

Notice the word LORD how it is in all capital letters. This is the Hebrew word for Jehovah. Aaron was not calling for the worship of false gods, he was calling for the worship of Jehovah through the use of this image he had just made. The image was to function, in his interpretation of it, as a reminder of Jehovah not as the false gods that were worshipped in Egypt.

So between the Israelites and Aaron we are able to surmise that what was taking place in the fashioning of this golden calf was a breaking of the first and the second commandments that they had heard announced by God himself. The Israelites were set to worship false gods and Aaron was set to worship the true God but with the use of an image. Aaron, I suppose, could have viewed that image as an emblem of the gods that Jehovah had just conquered in the overthrow of Egypt. It could have served, in his mind, as a reminder that Jehovah had been all powerful.

This is where idolatry can become more subtle. Aaron was not calling for the worship of false gods. He was calling for a feast to Jehovah, the true God, but he was calling for God to be worshipped in the wrong way. And the thing that needs to be recognized and appreciated when it comes to the worship of God is that God tells his people how he's to be worshipped.

Away from the scene of this idolatry is Moses up in the mount. He would be in that mount for 40 days and 40 nights and the thing that would be conveyed to Moses while he was in that mount was how God was to be worshipped. The tabernacle pattern would be given to Moses, each piece of tabernacle furniture would be laid out in precise detail. The pattern for the priests garments would also be given as well as the formula for the incense that would be burned on the altar of incense.

If you've read through the later chapters in the book of Exodus then you know how much meticulous detail is conveyed to Moses by God himself. Now the question that often times arises in the minds of some Christians, especially in the minds of young Christians is the question that goes something like this: Why is God so picky about the way he's worshipped? Why does God go into such detailed instruction with Moses? Shouldn't it satisfy God that he's worshipped at all? Shouldn't God be happy that he is being worshipped rather than false gods?

The answer is, of course, that sinners do not have access to God – those that are rebels against God cannot approach one who is majestic in holiness and fearful in praises. If God is to be approached at all in a way that he will accept then it must be on the terms that he stipulates. And it should be noted here that all of the meticulous detail that was given to Moses was not given arbitrarily. God was not giving, in other words, all of these detailed instructions simply because he had the authority to give detailed instructions and it was his prerogative to give detailed instructions.

It is his prerogative – but that does not take away from the fact that there was good reason behind every detail that was prescribed to Moses. Everything, you see, that went into the pattern of Old Testament worship was designed to portray some aspect of Christ. The study of the tabernacle and the worship associated with the tabernacle becomes a very rich study when you learn to look for the person and work of Christ.

And when you realize the Christological significance of each piece of tabernacle furniture and all the sacrifices that were to be offered in Old Testament worship then you realize that God would guard the way he was worshipped because God was jealous for the honor of his Son and apart from his Son there is no approach to God.

What a far cry from God picturing his Son do we find beneath that mountain in the camp of the Israelites when Aaron decides that Jehovah can be worshipped in any fashion that sinful men would invent. In Aaron's own mind he may have even viewed himself as a contender for the faith since he was calling not for the worship of false gods but for the worship of Jehovah, the true God, through the use of images.

You would have noticed in the reading of this chapter in Exodus that God makes no distinction between the Israelites and Aaron. They all became guilty of idolatry and God was so incensed by the notion that he could be approached in any way that sinful men decided to approach him that he would have unleashed his wrath upon them all, including Aaron and would have started over again with Moses.

But let's bring the matter of idolatry into our time and culture. The lesson that we must take from this 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Exodus that applies in every age is that men cannot and must not invent their own ways to worship God – not even if they are worshipping the true God. And of course the lesson should be quite plain that there is no approach to God apart from Christ.

Before we leave this point, I think it's worth noting that there are a couple of other things that appear in this chapter that are found most often where ever idolatry exists. The thing to keep in mind here is that idolatry is always man-made and springs from man fashioning a god or fashioning a style of worship according to his own carnal pleasures. Two verses give us the picture of this worship style. The first is found in v. 18. As Moses and Joshua come down from the mount Joshua makes the remark to Moses that there is a noise of war in the camp. Moses replies that this is not the voice of war *but the noise of them that sing do I hear* he says in v. 18. Think about that for a moment – the voice of singing being mistaken for the voice of war. The picture that comes to mind is the scene you often see in old Westerns when savage Indians are dancing around working themselves into a frenzy in preparation for war.

The second verse that contributes to the picture of the worship style is found in v. 25. The AV might be a little restrictive in the word it uses when we read *And Moses saw that the people were naked*. The term *naked* is a word that literally means that were *let loose*. So one English version translates the phrase *the people had broken lose*; another version translates it *the people were out of control*. You know that whenever people break loose in this fashion and lose control immodesty follows and hence the use of the word by the AV translators that they were naked.

Do you begin to get the picture then? This worship service – this feast to the LORD amounted to a sensual and immodest breaking off the bands of restraint in order to carry on in a wild frenzy. If I could put it in common modern day jargon I would say that this was a fun worship service. Isn't that a common appeal especially to young people today. Come to such and such a church where worship is fun which amounts to saying where worship is carnal and worship is unrestrained and a worship becomes a time that allows you to throw off restraint and cut loose so to speak.

The vividness of this scene of idolatry given to us in Exodus 32 certainly demonstrates to us yet another reason why God dictates to his people how he is to be worshipped. What if God left it to human beings to determine for themselves how they would worship God? What if God said, in effect, it really doesn't matter how you worship me as long as you make sure that you're worshipping me rather than false gods? This chapter in Exodus shows us how degenerate worship would become and how unbecoming to the character of God worship would be if God left it to man to invent the way he would worship.

So we see in this chapter what idolatry looks like. Let me move quickly to deal with the question:

## II. What Gives Rise to Idolatry?

I said in my introduction that this chapter moves us to astonishment. These Israelites who had heard the voice of God and had seen the power and known the protection and provision of God now fall into such degradation that they completely cave in to their carnal natures. How can such a thing happen? More importantly – could such a thing happen to you and to me?

If you know anything at all about the strength of inbred sin then you know that such a fall is possible to anyone of us. And if you would guard yourself against such a total collapse to the flesh then it becomes important to see what contributes to such a fall.

The answer to the question is given to us in v. 1. Notice what it says: *And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.*

Do you see what led to their fall into carnality? It was a lack of patience on their part. And you could say it was due to having too much time on their hands with nothing better to do. I will try to exercise restraint here by only mentioning that so much that takes place on social media sites like “facebook” takes place because of too much idle time. There’s time for subtle and malicious gossip much of which springs from the flesh but is thinly covered over with a phony semblance of spirituality.

I’ve mentioned in the past that a good Bible verse to keep near at hand when it comes to viewing television is Psalm 119: 37 *Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way.* I think another verse that we would do well to keep near at hand when it comes to social networking would be 2Ti 3:6 *For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts.* You would do well to ask yourselves when you’re entering your posts on facebook if what you’re doing falls under the censure of that verse. I can’t help but wonder if some indeed if much of that time could be put to better spiritual use by actually waiting on the Lord. But that takes patience and it takes persevering faith.

And how many churches today do you suppose have fallen into idolatry or into idolatrous worship styles because of a lack of patience when it comes to waiting on God?

Instead of patient persevering in prayer for God to work in a way that will bring glory to his name – for God to work in a way where it becomes unmistakably plain that God is the one who is at work – church leaders instead lose patience and decide that it’s time to plan – to plan on how the worship services can be made more fun and more lively and thus become more relevant and more engaging for the young people.

We would do so much better to heed the word of the Lord that comes through the prophet Habakkuk in Hab 2:3 where the Lord says through his prophet: *For the vision [is] yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.*

It's a very easy thing to say but a great challenge to our faith to learn that God's timetable is not our timetable and God is never late and God is never in a hurry and if we don't have the patience to bring ourselves into subjection to God's timetable then gross idolatry will be the inevitable result.

So we've seen what idolatry looks like and I hope I've been able to convey to you some of the more subtle manifestations of idolatry. We've seen a major contributing cause to idolatry is a lack of patience. I'll only take a moment to conclude this study by raising the question:

### III. What Must be Done with Idolatry?

And the answer to this question is that we should be as incensed by idolatry as Moses was incensed by the sight and sounds of idolatry that he beheld. Preach to yourselves. You've heard me say that before. Preach to yourselves with the fervency that would have you, like Moses, throwing the tables of the law down in intense indignation, breaking them beneath the mount and then grinding the idol into powder.

Preach to yourselves with the same fervency that would call you to the Lord's side and would call you to take up arms and then move you to make your way through the camp of your own heart slaying every vestige of idolatry that you discover in your heart. Self judgment is the privilege that the Lord himself gives us in order that we may avoid his chastisement. *For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged* Paul writes in 1Cor. 11:31.

So we preach to ourselves and then we thank God that we have an intercessor in heaven. We've read how Moses intercession prevented the Lord's wrath from being unleashed upon the Israelites. Moses pleaded the honor of God's name and he pleaded the covenant promises.

And so does Christ, a greater intercessor than Moses, plead for you and for me that our sins including our sins of idolatry may be put away under his blood. If we had more time we'd do well to follow Exodus 32 with the study of what took place in Exodus 33. I'll leave it to you to read the chapter and if you read it you can draw the lesson from it that Moses gives by his example of what could be viewed as the alternative to idolatry.

Look at his petition in v. 18 and keep in mind that this petition follows Moses successful intercession for forgiveness and for the presence of God to go with them into the promised land. After gaining much from a gracious God Moses then prays *I beseech thee, show me thy glory*.

There's the alternative to idolatry. There's the spiritual pursuit that should engage your heart rather than allowing your heart to fall into the carnal manifestations of idolatry. Show me more of Christ – more of his saving fullness see, more of his love who died for me. May God help us then to see the heinous nature of idolatry – may he enable us all to recognize it when it manifests itself and to judge it and replace it with the spiritual and scriptural seeking of more of Christ's glory.