

Let's Pray: Father, in your mercy please speak to us now. In your grace, show us the beauty of your Son, and the ugliness of our sin. In your kindness, do not leave us at the END of our time together as we were at the beginning. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Let me ask you a question. As you think back over your life, what is THE most important choice you've ever made? Something that has really changed the trajectory of your life. Maybe it was connected with a job, or a relationship, or a place to live.

Maybe it seemed like a small choice at the time - saying yes to something, or no to something - but it turned out to be huge, for better or for worse.

But I want to say as we look at Exodus 32, there's a choice which is in your hands that is MUCH **bigger** and more **significant** than all your other choices put together.

And the frightening thing is, even though as we'll see, this choice WILL set the entire trajectory of your life, it's possible you don't even REALISE that this choice is in your hands.

And the choice is this: You get to choose what to WORSHIP. You get to choose what to worship.

Now even if you don't think of yourself as a religious or worshipping kind of person, we ALL worship -. And though the choice of WHAT we worship may be in our hands, the consequences are not.

The Bible has a name for these “objects of worship”: it calls them IDOLS. So there are four questions we’re going to answer as we look at this chapter:

- 1. What are idols?**
- 2. Why do we turn to idols?**
- 3. How do idols affect us?**
- 4. What hope is there for people in the grip of idols?**

First, what are idols? Look at Verse 2:

Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” 3 So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.

Now where did the Israelites get these gold ear-rings that they use to make this golden calf?

This is the jewelry that God gifted his people as he delivered them from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. He moved the Egyptians to give it to the Israelites as they were leaving. And it was intended by God to be used in the building of the tabernacle, a place in which the Israelites would praise and worship God for his goodness to them.

So what's happening here is a text book definition of what idol is. An idol is something good - the gold intended for the tabernacle - that has been turned into a god.

And the Bible says that you and I do the same. We take a gift that has been given to us by God, is intended to be used for his praise and worship, and we turn it into a god-substitute. And it could be ANYTHING: a spouse, a job, health, money, sex, influence, family, an experience, a particular cause or philosophy, you name it. But what makes it an idol is that we look to IT for the ultimate security and meaning and satisfaction that only God can provide.

It's what you desire above all else. Something that if you lost it, would make you feel that life wasn't worth living. Something you see yourself getting in your best dreams, and what you see yourself losing in your worst nightmares.

That's an object of worship. That's a golden calf. It's what you desire above all else. And I hope it's clear from what I've said so far that you don't have to be religious to worship.

In the first Harry Potter book, *The Sorcerer's Stone*, you may remember, Harry finds this mirror, "The mirror of Erised". On the mirror it says: "I show not your face but your heart's desire."

Dumbledore says: "It shows you the deepest and most DESPERATE desires of our heart. Men have wasted away in front of it, even gone mad."

As an orphan, Harry looks into the mirror, and he sees his parents. Ron looks into the mirror and sees himself as Head Boy and Quidditch Captain, holding aloft the House Cup. That's what he wants above all else.

Erised, of course, is "DESIRE" backwards. And It's a scary moment when people look into that mirror. Because they don't really know what they're going to see. Maybe it's a desire they've never admitted to anyone, or something they're not even fully aware of. But when they see it, it's completely captivating.

And the question is: What is it for you? You look into the mirror of Erised... what do YOU see?

For me, the scariest thing about this chapter is that this golden calf isn't cooked up by pagans. It's not set up and worshipped by people who don't know any better. This idol is created by GOD's people. And then, what's worse, **verse 5**, they put a hypocritical veneer over the top of it, as if to yep, I know it looks like we're worshiping an idol, but verse 5, it's all going to be ok because we're gonna say that this is "a feast to the Lord."

So we can seem to be raising our hands in worship to the living God, and yet inwardly we can be raising our hands to another god. We can be singing a rousing chorus of "What can make me whole again? Nothing But The Blood of Jesus" and inside be singing, "What Can Make Me Whole Again? Nothing But the Money". "Nothing But The Girlfriend or Boyfriend". "Nothing But the Career". "Nothing But a Spouse can make me whole."

So why are we like this? That's our second heading:

Why do we turn to idols?

The first reason is fear. Look at **verse 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."

Where's our leader? Are we going to be left to die in the wilderness?

Martin Luther said, trying times help us to see our true gods. Where do you instinctively turn when you're afraid or in difficulty? Luther says: "if your heart flies to anything other than God in the middle of adversity, if your heart expects more good and help from this thing than from God, then you have an idol, another god."

So hardship and fear can make us turn to idols.

But we can also turn to idols simply because we're impatient.

Verse 1, when they see Moses is **delayed**, that's when they ask for new gods.

Do you ever feel impatient? We hear about the joy that can be ours in Christ, but we're not feeling it, or at least not as much as we want, and in those moments we can start to think, this is taking too long. I need that joy from somewhere, maybe I need to try something else.

We've been talking about the ancient paths over the last few months, and I think one of the reasons we in Christian evangelical circles are so enamoured of novelty is because like the Israelites, we are IMPATIENT. We want to see RESULTS NOW. And when we don't see them, we create new gods we can bow down in front of: shiny new techniques, new programs, celebrity pastors, church growth strategies. And very subtly, we can start to put our hope in THEM instead of in God himself.

Another reason we turn to idols is because we want gods who are physical and tangible.

While God's people were in captivity in Egypt for 400 years, they had seen the Egyptians worshipping very VISIBLE idols during that time. Statues. Effigies. Many of them, incidentally, looked like calves - so there's a point being made here about how easily we can take on the gods of the surrounding culture. And so the Israelites have experienced a kind of spiritual Stockholm Syndrome: they've fallen in love with the gods of their captors.

They want gods like the ones the Egyptians had. Visible, physical gods you could point at and say "THAT is going to save me".

It's as if they're saying, "We are tired of walking by faith in someone we cannot see. We want to walk by sight." Can you relate to that?

I want a god that seems more real to me because I can see it, I can touch it, I can hold it, and by implication, I can manage it and CONTROL it.

And that's another reason we turn to idols. BECAUSE idols are DUMB, that is, they don't actually speak, we can pretend that the idol wants what WE want. We can use them to legitimize our own desires.

That's what's going on in **verse 6. They create a god who is happy to let them do whatever they want.** You see, once the golden calf is built,

...the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to PLAY.

"Rising up to play" is a sexual overtone we're meant to pick up on. They want to over-indulge their appetites in every area, not just in the area of food and drink. And if that is what you want to do, then of course you need a god who will be fine with that.

It is so often the case that the gods we choose for ourselves are totally ok with whatever we've already decided WE want to do, especially sexually.

I know one pastor who had a very direct way of counseling certain kinds of men. These men, who would previously have said they were Christian, would come in to his study and say something like this: "Pastor, I've been doing lots of reading and research. As a result I can no longer believe the Bible is true, and I'm not even sure that God exists any more." At that point, the pastor would lean forward and say, "So when did you start sleeping with your girlfriend?"

You see, if that's what you've already decided you want to do, and you're determined to do that, then you're going to have to dispense with the God who forbids that, and replace him with a new god - or a new understanding of the Bible - which is totally ok with what you want to do.

But, we might say, so what? Why is idolatry such a big deal in this chapter, and throughout Scripture? Well that takes us to our third heading:

How do idols affect us?

Look at **verse 7**: God says to Moses:

"Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have *corrupted* themselves."

Worshiping idols CORRUPTS us. And this happens in several ways.

One of the ways this happens, and this is one of the great themes of Scripture: as human beings we are profoundly formed - or DEformed - by *who or what we love most*. To put it another way, **we BECOME what we worship**. We start to resemble what we most revere.

It's Daytona Bike Week of course. I don't know if you've noticed. And it's fascinating to observe how the great god of biking shapes its worshipers. All the devotees have the same incredibly loud motorcycle, they have the same bandana, the same faded Daytona Bike Week t-shirt, the same pony tail, and as far as I can tell, they have the same WIFE sitting on the back. It's remarkable. But that is what happens when you worship the great mysterious god whose name is "Harley Davidson".

We become what we worship.

The Bible says if we love Christ more than anything or anyone else, then we will become more and more like him. We will reflect him more and more.

But it works negatively too.

For a long time as a younger man, I worshipped what I like to call "the god of Open Options". I just wanted to keep my options open all the time, especially in relationships, because I was so scared of missing out on something better.

If someone invited me to something on Facebook, I would never say "Yes" or "No"; it would always be "Maybe". I became this indecisive, non-committal person. I became what I worshiped.

Now I did this because I thought it would make me feel free. But when the time came that I actually WANTED to make a big relational decision, I felt like I was in a straitjacket. On the one hand, because I wanted to keep my options open, I couldn't fully COMMIT to any one relationship; but on the other hand, I couldn't fully walk away from it either, because that would mean closing off my options. So I was free to do anything - except the ONE thing I wanted to do. And that was desperately harmful, not only for me of course, but also to the other person caught up in it.

So that's one way idols affect us: we become like them. It is no coincidence that the Israelites worship a calf, which is a stiff-necked creature, and then God describes them in verse 9 as a "stiff-necked people".

Idols corrupt us. And by the way, if the object of our worship is another person, we end up corrupting THEM as well as ourselves. To deify them is to de-humanize them.

For example, if a husband looks to his wife to meet his deepest desires for wholeness, his deepest desires to be fully understood, then he will crush her with those impossible expectations - because only God can satisfy those desires.

To take another example, when a man turns a woman into an OBJECT of worship, he OBJECTifies her. He gazes at her like she's going to fix everything wrong inside him, and in that moment, she becomes nothing more than an OBJECT. A means to an end. A mannequin or doll who is only of any value to the extent that she delivers what he wants. And of course, that ends up dehumanizing both the objectified AND the objectifier.

Which is why gazing at pornography is so utterly devastating, but we don't have time to go there.

Another way idols affect us is by demanding endless, exhausting sacrifices.

When the tabernacle WAS eventually built, it was built using freewill offerings. People gave whatever they wanted to the living God; they weren't coerced or bullied or forced in any way.

But the golden calf DEMANDS their gold. Aaron DEMANDS that they give over all their jewelry - presumably all their wealth at this point - to build this new god.

And then, it demands more sacrifices in **verse 6**: "they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings."

Idols demand endless sacrifices for a salvation that never comes. And that constant demand for more sacrifices will crush you.

For example, if you worship the god of physical beauty, you will sacrifice more and more time at the gym, you will sacrifice more and more money at the pharmacy and on cosmetics, and maybe even on surgery. You may end up sacrificing your own health through eating disorders of one kind or another.

And again, beauty isn't wrong. Of course not! But when a good thing becomes a god thing, it will be merciless. It will be a savage deity with a gaping insatiable mouth. It WILL demand ever more sacrifices from you, and no matter how many sacrifices you make, you will NEVER quite feel attractive enough.

The novelist David Foster Wallace absolutely got this. He was not a Christian by the way, but he said this:

"An outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will **eat you alive**.

If you worship money and things... then you will never feel you have enough.

Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. [...]

Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.”

Now hang on, you might say, doesn't the living God demand sacrifices of the Israelites too?

Yes he does, but with two major differences: firstly, with God, the promised Salvation actually comes. With idols it never does. And secondly, that promised salvation doesn't depend on the sacrifices THEY make for HIM. God's salvation depends on a sacrifice HE makes for THEM, on their behalf. As we will see.

The final way idols affect us is that they bring about God's anger. Look at verse 9:

And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 10 Now therefore let me alone, *that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them...*”

Now at this point, instinctively, even as Christians, we tend to wince a little bit don't we? God's anger at sin makes us profoundly uncomfortable. Isn't God supposed to be love? Isn't that what Scripture says?

And then we see **verse 27**, where the Levites, acting on God's command, kill three thousand men for their idolatry. And we read **verse 35**, where the LORD sends a plague on the people for the same reason.

What's going on? Is God a God of love, or is God a God of anger?

You know, four months ago, Lee and I had a little daughter, Adaline. And you'll know this if you've had kids - the love and protectiveness you feel toward your child is just overwhelming. I've never felt anything like it in my life. You would do anything to protect them. And if someone were to even TRY to hurt her in some way, to say I would be angry would be a huge understatement.

I saw a documentary recently which was the awful story of a boy who had been abused. He's an adult now with his own young son, and he looked at the interviewer and said, very calmly, "Honestly, if I saw someone doing to my son what was done to me, I would kill them."

And at that point, as you're watching, you think, "I totally get that." It doesn't seem like an unreasonable response. You don't think, oh that's not very loving of him. In fact, as I watched, I realized something: this father's anger wasn't the opposite of love. It actually PROVED how much he loved his child.

If he had sat there and said, yeah, if someone hurt my son, I don't think I'd feel anything at all - you'd say, have you lost your mind? Don't you LOVE your child? Don't you WANT to protect them?

So when we come to our heavenly Father, who loves his children even more than we love ours, why would we expect him to respond with anything *less* than fierce anger?

God's anger is not *opposed* to his love. It is PROOF of it. So when he sees idolatry in the camp of his people, his anger is rightly aroused because idolatry doesn't just HURT his children in the ways we've already seen. It will lead his children to DEATH, because it leads them away from Him.

And that is why the PUNISHMENT for idolatry is death.

As Larry said last week, God's laws reflect his LOVE. The reason the very first commandment is: "you shall have no other gods besides me" is not because God is petty and insecure about his ranking in the Billboard Hot 100 of deities. It's the first commandment because to worship anything other than Him will corrupt us, and DESTROY us.

He is utterly right to be angry about idolatry, and he is right to judge it wherever it's found.

But that leaves us with a massive problem, doesn't it? Because which one of us can honestly say we've never committed idolatry in our hearts? We are, by our very nature, objects of God's wrath.

And that brings us to our final heading: What hope is there?

How can we can be saved from the judgement that our idolatry deserves?

Maybe you noticed this, but Exodus 32 is a tale of two mediators: Aaron and Moses. Aaron mediates between the people and Moses, and he does a terrible job. He lies to Moses, and he tries to wriggle his way out of responsibility.

You see that in **verse 24**, which is one of the most darkly funny lines in all of Scripture. Moses demands an explanation for the existence of the golden calf, and Aaron says (verse 24): "I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and *out came this calf.*" As excuses go, it's less than convincing.

But it's also the tale of another mediator: Moses.

Moses, by contrast, faces up to the reality of their idolatry. He sees what it does to God's people, and he understands that to do this is to take God's loving laws and smash them to pieces - which is of course what he does, quite literally, in verse 19.

Unlike Aaron, Moses takes responsibility for his people's sin, even though he doesn't commit idolatry himself. He intercedes for God's people, and as a result, God relents from destroying them completely.

Then in **verse 32**, Moses even goes so far as to offer his own life as a substitute on their behalf: "if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot ME out of your book that you have written."

And yet, even though Moses is a far better mediator than Aaron, this chapter shows us that we need a far better mediator than Moses.

Because even though Moses intercedes for them, pleads for them, and even offers himself as a substitute in their place, God does not accept that offer. God insists in **Verse 33**: "Whoever has sinned against me, I WILL blot out of my book. **Verse 34** ...In the day when I visit, I WILL visit their sin upon them." And then **Verse 35**: "the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf".

What God is showing us here is that idolatry is so serious, so deadly, that it demands a better mediator, even than Moses. He is showing us that there is no special pleading, no personally taking responsibility, no religious act or self-sacrifice that can possibly atone for what has happened.

But what if... what if God provided a better mediator even than Moses? One who would approach God on behalf of his people as Moses did, plead their case for them as Moses does, intercede for them as he does, take responsibility for their idolatry, offer himself as a substitute on their behalf, his life for theirs, and then - unlike Moses - have that offer accepted by God.

And as we reach the New Testament era, and we start reading the gospels, we see that God has indeed sent the better Mediator we desperately need.

Jesus Christ perfectly kept all of the commandments that you and I have smashed to pieces.

He ascends the mount of Calvary, as Moses does Mt Sinai. He offers himself as a substitute on our behalf, his life for ours, as Moses does, so that we could be reconciled to God. But this time, as Jesus' resurrection shows, the substitution on our behalf is accepted.

In verse 20, Moses burned the golden calf, ground it to powder and made God's PEOPLE drink down that bitter cup as a symbol of God's bitter wrath against their idolatry.

But on the cross, JESUS drinks down the bitter cup of the Father's wrath instead of his people. He does it FOR us. It's the cup Jesus refers to in Gethsemane when he says: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

And now, just as Moses interceded for his people at the top of the mountain, Romans chapter 8 tells us that Jesus has ascended infinitely further - to God's right hand - where he is interceding for his people even now. Jesus truly is the better Moses. The better Mediator.

There's also something very significant about the 3000 who die by the sword. That punishment for idolatry falls on the 50th day after God liberates them from Egypt. But what happens 50 days after Jesus liberates his people on the cross? Pente-cost, which literally means 50th Day. In Acts 2 it says that "3000 were ADDED to their number [on] that day." It's as if those two "50th Day" events reflect each other - one in judgement, and the other in salvation.

We're meant to see: there is only one hope for idolaters like you and me, only one Mediator who can give us life and salvation.

Have you put your trust in him? Even though you may be fearful, anxious or impatient, even though as yet you cannot physically see him, do you look to HIM as your hope, security and joy?

If not, it may perhaps be because you don't yet see how much more desirable he is than any other god. If that's you, would you pray for eyes to see that?

And you might start with this thought. Our golden calves demand that WE make endless sacrifices for THEM. And at the end of it all they leave us with nothing except the expectation of judgement.

Jesus Christ is the only God who says, *I* myself have already sacrificed FOR you, on your behalf, and it's the only one you'll ever need.

1. What are idols? 2. Why do we turn to idols? 3. How do idols affect us? 4. What hope is there for idolaters?

Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, all you have been burdened with a lifetime of fruitless sacrifice, and I will give you the satisfaction, the joy, the security, and the rest you've been yearning for all your life.