

## **Weekly Study of Sunday's Message.**

**August 17, 2025 Surviving in the wilderness. The struggle to not make things represent our God.**

### **I Intro.**

We're pretty much into our fall schedule. Many of our ministries and activities have started back up. And you'll see more and more opportunities for you to participate in the life of NCC. So, stay connected to our social media to keep up with everything that's happening. We're glad you've chosen to join us as we move through 2025. Welcome to our companion devotional to Sunday's message. It's just a part of all we have to offer to you. Whether you were able to participate in this service or not, this devotion is free-standing. We hope you find this tool helpful on your spiritual journey. We don't want you to miss out on anything. We consider you part of our community. We have many ways you can plug into life at NCC. You can find all those through our website, app, and social media sites. Our app is the best way to livestream our services, but you can also livestream on FaceBook and YouTube. You can revisit past services, sign up for events and even give. We're encouraged by your presence when you gather with us. New and familiar faces join us every Sunday. If you join us online, we appreciate your presence. We are 100% committed to our virtual attenders. We are your church family, and if there is anything you need, prayer, or anything else, please let us know.

### **II Recap.**

**Premise for this series: "Surviving in the wilderness"**. At times in our lives we feel lost, uncertain, disoriented, and not sure what we should do. We call this 'The Wilderness'. It often feels like we are wandering looking for something familiar or meaningful, that would help us get back on course.

### **Some understandings that will frame our conversation for this series.**

**1. Wandering in the wilderness is a season of change.** There are going to be times in your life you find yourself no longer on the path you had planned, thought you were on. All the things you had planned, expectations, hopes, dreams and more all get thrown to the side. The plans, ideas, path you were on aren't working or available anymore. Don't know if you should try to keep going on that one, or switch to something new.

**2. Wandering in the wilderness is a loss of your identity.** (Who you once were) The experiences that made you who you are, got you where you are, will need to be revisited, reordered, and revised. This season is an invitation to discover who you will become.

**3. Wandering in the wilderness is cultivating and an openness to 'new'.** Wandering is about transition. The wilderness leads to a sense of disorientation around beliefs, values, your faith. Maybe specific plans, dreams, hopes, aspirations, etc. What you thought was true, trustworthy, certain about, is stripped away. The wilderness gives us an opportunity to let go of the way you used to do things, life, and entertain new ideas, ways of seeing things and incorporate new practices and expectations into your life. It is in this felt place of wandering in the wilderness, we want to help you to still find sacredness and a way to restore and reorder your world to make it out of the wilderness.

### **III Sunday.**

Today is going to be a really hard teaching. I struggled with what to do with it. I'm not going to dig into every aspect or try to unpack every detail or word. The story takes an entire chapter to tell, so we'll hit the major points by talking about the surface level events, and then hit the deeper truths. There are

some larger, overriding truths in this account that can help us when we're wandering in the wilderness, and are tempted to resort to some unhealthy habits.

**1. When it feels like God leaves us.** Classic temptation when we're wandering in the wilderness.

**32:1 When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. "Come on," they said, "make us some gods who can lead us. We don't know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt."**

Moses had been gone a long time. And the people were really dependent on him. Moses was their connection to God. When Moses was gone, God felt gone. There are times we ask; **"Where is God?"** This is the feeling of wandering in the wilderness: **"Who can I trust now?"**

It may not have been easy before, but at least it was familiar. And because things are unfamiliar, we will look for something to hold onto that gives us a sense of control. Again, this is rooted in a lack of patience and trust. We don't like the wilderness, and will do anything to ease the discomfort. We may know what we elevate is not good for us, but we'll still turn to it. When we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness, be aware of the natural tendency when it feels like God is gone, we'll look for other things to take God's place.

**What have you noticed you turning to in your wandering?**

**2. Transforming everyday valuable things into something to fill a void.** Because we feel lost, we'll turn to, or create something, to give us something tangible to hold onto.

**32:2-6 So Aaron said, "Take the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters, and bring them to me." All the people took the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded it into the shape of a calf. When the people saw it, they exclaimed, "O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" Aaron saw how excited the people were, so he built an altar in front of the calf. Then he announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!" The people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry.**

This isn't demonic, worshipping idols. This was making something not God into God. The Israelites were told to take all of their gold and precious metals with them into the wilderness. There was going to be another purpose for these. But gifts and wealth that were supposed to be used for God were used for personal pleasure. The tendency is when we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness to turn the things that are good, worthy, into gods. Things like our family, job, a relationship, stuff. We will always fight the temptation and draw of surrounding ourselves with what we can see, shape, and control. In the stress and lostness of wandering in the wilderness there is this grasping for something tangible.

**3. God tells Moses the people have turned from him.** This is a weird passage, so stay with me. It's in the story, but it reveals something about God. We see the importance of relationships with God.

**32:7-14 The LORD told Moses, "Quick! Go down the mountain! Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live! They have melted down gold and made a calf, and they have bowed down and sacrificed to it. They are saying, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.'" Then the LORD said, "I have seen how stubborn and rebellious these people are. Now leave me alone so my fierce anger can blaze against them,**

***and I will destroy them. Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation.” But Moses tried to pacify the LORD his God. “O LORD!” he said. “Why are you so angry with your own people whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such great power and such a strong hand? Why let the Egyptians say, ‘Their God rescued them with the evil intention of slaughtering them in the mountains and wiping them from the face of the earth’? Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you have threatened against your people! Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You bound yourself with an oath to them, saying, ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And I will give them all of this land that I have promised to your descendants, and they will possess it forever.’” So the LORD changed his mind about the terrible disaster he had threatened to bring on his people.***

God sees what the people are doing, gets rather upset about it, and tells Moses he’s done. He’s going to start over. I want us to feel what God feels in the moment. We’ve all been in a situation where we’ve bent over backwards, sacrificed ourselves for someone else, and then have it not only not appreciated but disrespected. This is a really tough view of God. But I want us to identify with it. This is frustration, disappointment, and real anger. In relationships there is always a tension between anger and mercy. Hold onto that. Moses talks God out of destroying the people, and he relents. God chooses mercy in this situation. Consider the truth- No matter how bad wandering in the wilderness may be. All that we go through. Deeply consider what will preserve relationships.

**4. The consequences of making unsacred things sacred.** The next section is a really tough passage. I’m not going to shy away from it. Just try to understand it in the context of the day. We’ll then pull some larger truths from it that maintain the integrity of the passage, what can we learn, without just dropping recklessly into our current day.

***32:17-29 When Joshua heard the boisterous noise of the people shouting below them, he exclaimed to Moses, “It sounds like war in the camp!” But Moses replied, “No, it’s not a shout of victory nor the wailing of defeat. I hear the sound of a celebration.”***

***When they came near the camp, Moses saw the calf and the dancing, and he burned with anger. He threw the stone tablets to the ground, smashing them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf they had made and burned it. Then he ground it into powder, threw it into the water, and forced the people to drink it. Finally, he turned to Aaron and demanded, “What did these people do to you to make you bring such terrible sin upon them?”***

***“Don’t get so upset, my lord,” Aaron replied. “You yourself know how evil these people are. They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will lead us. We don’t know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt.’ So I told them, ‘Whoever has gold jewelry, take it off.’ When they brought it to me, I simply threw it into the fire—and out came this calf!”***

***Moses saw that Aaron had let the people get completely out of control, much to the amusement of their enemies. So he stood at the entrance to the camp and shouted, “All of you who are on the LORD’s side, come here and join me.” And all the Levites gathered around him. Moses told them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Each of you, take your swords and go back and forth from one end of the camp to the other. Kill everyone—even your brothers, friends, and neighbors.” The Levites obeyed Moses’ command, and about 3,000 people died that day. Then Moses told the Levites, “Today you have ordained yourselves for***

***the service of the LORD, for you obeyed him even though it meant killing your own sons and brothers. Today you have earned a blessing."***

Camp out on this passage for a while, and hopefully help us read and understand it in a way that is most honest and beneficial.

#### **AN ASIDE-**

**1. Misuse of this passage as justification for purity.** This passage has been weaponized by those who want to justify the work of purification. A justification to remove OTHER people that don't fit into our understanding of what it means to dedicate ourselves to God. Swing the sword and clean house. God wanted the ancient Israelites to maintain cultural, moral, religious, purity as they passed through other nations. That is why we see the intensity of the purge. Read it in its historical context.

**2. Fight the urge to misuse this passage.** We may want that level of sameness. We may be uncomfortable with the diversity, and pluralism we see in the U.S. You see an unfortunate push to exclude certain people groups. I don't want to go off on a tangent here, but be very careful of anyone who tries to sell you a golden calf of getting rid of anyone not like us. You see in our world today, a push to take O.T. passages to justify discrimination, hate, the horrible treatment of people that don't fit a very narrow view of what some people believe this country should look like. This is God's work...not ours. Read, interpret, apply these passages with real respect and honor for what scripture tells us, rather than a hammer to force our specific perspective on others. We, as Christians (little Christs) need to constantly push against this golden calf temptation of using this prescriptively rather than descriptively.

I think a more Christlike way to interpret this passage is to use it as a model about how ruthlessly we remove things in our own life that we try to replace God with. Make this a personal challenge to examine ourselves, rather than a sword to swing.

**How many things have each of us turned into a sacred cow, a golden calf...we have convinced ourselves is of God?**

When we've been diverted off the path we were once on. Wandering in the wilderness. When we find ourselves feeling lost, unfocused, disoriented with no real direction. We've lost that sense of purpose, commitment, meaning of life to keep us going. We'll grab onto anything, elevate some aspect of our lives, to help give us a sense of purpose, direction, that we had before. Where this story should hit us hard, forcing us to deal with our own golden calves.

**This is a time of real inner work looking for our own golden calves.** A brutal, ruthless honesty about what we may have elevated to a level of importance we hope gives us a sense of meaning, direction, when we're wandering in our wilderness.**READY?** Here we go.

**Our possible golden calves.**

**Certainty. Success. Achievement. Recognition.** (Likes and follows) **Family.** (That one should really sting) **Comfort. Numbing. Escapism. Control. Religion. Simple answers. Politics. Others?**  
**The key test is asking which of these can you not live without?**

#### **IV Challenge.**

What I hoped we were able to do today.

**1. Give you permission to understand we all make golden calves in our wandering in the wilderness.** Recognize we have a tendency to look for, or elevate something we can see or feel,

maybe control, when we feel lost, just wandering in our wilderness. The temptation to make things, even good things, into gods is always there. When we're wandering in the wilderness, we're grasping even more. We want CERTAINTY, CONTROL, KNOW WHO WE ARE, IMMEDIATE SATISFACTION. (Lack of patience and trust) Knowing this is a normal reaction, don't beat yourself up, but look for it.

**2. Root out, and ruthlessly remove anything that begins to resemble an attempt to make**

**something a god that isn't.** This is the call to be ever vigilant and watchful for when we do this.

Work on having a sense of when that tendency is rising up inside of you. Yes, elevating ungodly things as God seems to upset God. But not because he's just trying to make our lives miserable. Or he likes zapping us. But to save us from our own tendency to set ourselves up for disappointment, by making things that aren't God into a god. And making wandering in the wilderness even more disorienting. Your golden calves cannot hold up under the weight of your expectations. But God can. And God is willing to be that place you put all your trust and expectations in. To be the God, the real God, in your wandering. And you'll find what you need in the midst of your wandering in the wilderness.

**What is one first step you can take to begin to reveal things in your life you have formed into 'golden calves'?**