

The Sinai Experience

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Date: 24 September 2017

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[0 : 0 0] So we continue our great story series. We are taking the storybook stories, the famous children's stories of the Bible that have made it into the children's storybooks and having an adult's look at them, looking at their theology. And when you do that, there is always more to see than what's the common conception of these stories at a popular level. And there's plenty in this passage. We could do a few sermons. We could do a sermon on the poor leadership in the congregation from Aaron, the nature of true worship, or what it means to say that the Lord changes his mind in this passage. And that's a big topic and we just can't do it today. This is a classic passage in the Old Testament about idolatry. Now yesterday was the 80th anniversary of the world's introduction to one of the great literary characters of our time, Gandalf.

Yesterday was the 80th anniversary of the publication of the Hobbit and in commemoration of that to quote Gandalf, which is always worth it. He says there is nothing like looking if you are looking to find something. You certainly usually find something if you go and look for it, but it's not always quite the something you are actually looking for. And that's true of the storybook stories of the Bible. When you go looking for exactly what they say and you look a first time, a second time, a third time, a fourth time, the theology in these passages actually builds something a little bit more than you might have thought. And that's true of the Golden Calf narrative. And so let's just get right into it. It's about idolatry. We're going to look at the nuance of idolatry and then the nature of idolatry. So first the nuance of idolatry.

Moses is on the mountain when we open this passage. He has been on the mountain since chapter 19. He was on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. Now it's likely and probable that he had come down from the mountain at least once during that time to give Israel the Ten Commandments because there's evidence that they already had heard the Ten Commandments at this point. But he was on the mountain and he had been up there for a while and the mountain is shrouded in the glory cloud of the God who had redeemed them, Yahweh, and they cannot see up it. And meanwhile, as we open the passage in verse 1, the people are impatient. They were tired of waiting for him. And so in verse 1 they say to Aaron, this so-called Moses, whoever that guy is, he is up the mountain. We haven't seen him in a while.

He's probably dead. Now that's the writer here, Moses. It's tragic comedy because this Moses, this so-called Moses, this is the guy who had redeemed them and the human being, the mediator, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, who had administered the Ten Plagues, who had crossed the Red Sea with them, who had prayed to God and brought manna down from the skies. And now just 40 days has passed, six weeks about, and they say, you remember that guy? What's his name? Moses. He's probably dead. And so they say to Aaron, let's, will you make for us gods? It's as they rose up against Aaron. That's the language of physical violence. It was, what's happening here is actually a mob. You can picture, this is a mob mentality. Now in verse 1 when they say, make us gods, the word for God, God's there, is a Hebrew word Elohim. And in Hebrew it's plural, but it can also be translated in the singular. It can go either way. And the evidence throughout the passage, and this, this story is repeated in Psalm 106 and 1 Corinthians 7.

And every time, the indication is that they only made one Elohim, one God, a singular golden calf. And it says that in just a couple verses later. And so you think of it, they're saying, make us, make us a God. Make us a God. And even the word God is a bit confusing in English. It's a little bit different from the original language, our term for, that we use kind of generically for God. The sense of what they're saying here is not just make us a God, but make us an image of God. Not just don't, they're not asking for them to create a whole new God, but make us an image of God. And the reason why they ask that, they say it in verse 1, who a God, an image of God, who can go before us. And that's a packed little phrase. A God who can go before us. What they're asking for, specifically is an image that they can put at the front of their camp to lead their army as they march away from the mountain. So what they're doing is saying, we don't want to be here anymore. We're impatient. Moses is up there on the mountain. He's probably dead. We need, we need a God that can sit before at the head of our army as we march away from the mountain and go get what God promised us, the promised land. And so what they want is something that they can follow, basically follow into battle, an image of God. And so what that means is that what's happening in this passage is they're not interested exactly in replacing God, which is probably the more common conception here. What they want to do is they want to replace the mediator, Moses. It's Moses that they're trying to replace. And what they want to do is they want to create a new mediator, an image of God, a mediator, a place, a thing that they can come and meet with God through. Moses used to be that for them. Moses used to be the one who would walk at the front, who would lead the army, but now they're looking for a new mediator. So they're not exactly replacing God. They're not saying, make for me a brand new God, some different spirit. What they're saying is, we want to, we want to have something by which we can get to God, the God who has redeemed us. And so this is idolatry, no doubt about it, sure, but what kind? And it's a little bit different than probably the common storybook conception of exactly what's going on here. They are not literally coming to worship the golden calf, but to worship Yahweh, the God who had redeemed them through the golden calf, through an image. And literally, actually, it's not a cow, it's a bull calf. And the text is pretty specific about that. It's literally a bull calf, and that's for a specific reason we'll come to in a minute. And so verse four, when Aaron makes this thing, it's actually better to say, Israel, this is the image of God, this golden bull calf, this is the image of God. And look, all the elements of tabernacle, temple, worship, are present in the passage. Aaron builds an altar in front of the calf, an altar to offer sacrifices to the Lord, it says to Yahweh, but through the mediation of the calf, the calf is like their high priest. And then he says, and we'll hold a feast day to the Lord, a feast day, not to the calf, but to the Lord, it says in the text. So what they think they're doing is they've basically built a temple, and at the center of this temple is the calf. This is like the Ark of the Covenant. This is the place where God will come and meet with them. This is the thing by which they can get God to do what they want God to do. And so in verse eight, when it says that God came down

[8 : 02] and he saw what they were doing, and God says they are worshiping the golden calf, the literal word there is they are making use of the golden calf. They're using it to worship me, and that's what angers, that is what is angering God.

That's what's driving God to wrath in this passage. Now this is important, just historical point, for understanding idolatry when you read your Old Testament. Most of the time in the Old Testament, when you encounter explicit idolatry, you know, the kind of idolatry we think of when we think of idolatry, making a wooden image, casting something out of metal. The ancient peoples did not literally think that the wood, the stone, the cat, the dog, whatever they had made was actually a God. And even in Egypt, that's not what they thought. The reason that they cast these images is because they were looking for mediators to get to the gods. They believed that the gods were spirits, and so they used these images, these things to get to the gods, and that's exactly what's happening here.

They're not trying to replace the Lord who had redeemed them. They're trying to worship the God, worship God through a false mediator, a mediator that God did not choose. God had chosen Moses to be their mediator. They want a different mediator. Moses may be dead on the mountain. They want a new mediator, a new image to lead them out in battle, to lead them into the promised land. So the first sin in this passage, it's not worshipping God the way God had commanded.

He be worshiped. But then there's a plunge, a descent. If the first sin is worshipping in a way that is a violation against God's commands, the second major sin in this passage is actually violating God's nature. It's doing something in worship that's totally against the very nature of God, and you see it in verse 6. It says in verse 6, the people sat down to eat and to drink, and they rose up to play. And that's the King James Version says it that way, and the ESV says it that way. The NIV says the people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up and indulged in revelry. The word to play in this passage, it is a sexual verb, and it literally means to caress. And so what it's saying is that they held a feast day to the Lord, and during it a sexual worship rite broke out. Actually what is being mentioned here is it's an orgiastic worship rite, something that would have been practiced in Egypt probably. And Moses acknowledges it, we didn't read this, but in verse 19 Moses came down and he saw the people, it says dancing, which is a euphemism. There was more going on than dancing. The worship has descended, it's plummeted. And so the surface sin of idolatry here is pretty easy to recognize. It's a theological issue and an ethical issue. First, they're worshipping God in the wrong way. We said last week

God defines reality at the burning bush. God defines who God is, and God also in this passage has defined just before this how it is that he's supposed to be approached, how it is that he's supposed to be worshiped. And if you have a God, a conception of a God, who you can define according to the way you want him to be, according to your own feelings, or if you have a God who you can approach any way you want to, to get to get God to do whatever you want, which is a God to what they think about God here, then you don't have a God who is greater than your heart, as 1 John chapter 3 puts it. You don't have a God that's greater than you. You don't have a God who's big and greater than your heart. And so you don't have a God at all. You have something that you can manipulate, a false God that you can work, and that's what they think about the God who has redeemed them. They don't understand his nature. And so here they've broken the second commandment that they had just heard from Moses. You shall not make a graven image. You should not make a metal or gold image or anything that and use it in worship. They broke the second man. Then they broke the seventh commandment.

[12 : 40] Which says, don't commit adultery. In other words, don't have a sexual relationship outside of marriage, and especially don't do it at church. And that's exactly what was happening here. They started practicing adultery in the middle of worship of the God who had just told them these commandments. Don't practice adultery. And they immediately are doing it in the worship ceremony. And so things have plummeted. And in the New Testament, God tells us how we are supposed to approach God in worship. And Jesus says it in Matthew 4 and John 4 in spirit and in truth. Which means in truth, in the name of Jesus Christ. Paul puts it this way in 1 Timothy 2, a passage that people often call Paul's worship rules. Where he says there's only one mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's only in his name that you can get to God. It's only through Jesus that you can worship well, that you can worship rightly. And so the issue in this passage is choosing a false mediator. A mediator that God did not choose. That's the synod idolatry in this passage. Next month is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. And I want to say just briefly, that's a preview to next month, just that the issue in here of choosing false mediators in worship is was fundamental to the reformers project of reforming worship.

Of only coming to God through Jesus Christ and by nothing else. Not through a priest. Not through getting grace by the Eucharist, by the Communion. Not through a pope or any other thing under heaven except for Jesus Christ. And that was central to what we're celebrating in October and the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. And there are still good reasons to be a person of Protestant, if you will, committed to that project of seeing the Reformation of worship throughout the world in the church and lamenting the brokenness and disunity of the church until that Reformation happens. Now that's my Reformation shout out for this month and there will be a few more probably next month as we celebrate the Reformation in October. But the sin on the surface of this passage, it's not coming to God in the way that God has commanded. That's the idol issue in the passage. But secondly, that's the nuance of the idolatry in this passage but the nature of idolatry in this passage. It's easy to identify on the surface of the text the issues, the worship problems here in this passage, but the deep sin, the deeper sin, the deeper issue, the sin below all sin, the impatience that the

Israelites have at the beginning of this passage is a symptom of a grave issue that's according to the Bible at the center of every single human heart. And Augustine called it having disordered loves, having disordered loves. The idea of disordered loves is easy enough to get if you should you love your career, should you love your job. Yes, of course you should. You should love your job, you should seek a job that you love. And should you love your family? Yes, of course, you should love your family. But if you love your career and your job more than your family in a different way, in a way that you should have loved your family, if you flip flop them, if you disordered the loves, then you will end up putting so much burden on your family that it will crush them and you will destroy your family life. And eventually your family will get, your children perhaps will have so much difficulty that it ends up actually hurting the career that you made an idol out of. And so if you have disordered loves, if you put one thing in the wrong spot, you can actually make it all crumble. And that was a

Guston's notion of disordered loves. And that's what he said is that the heart of all idolatry, the deep sin, the sin beneath the surface sin, the sin beneath every single circumstance of sin is an issue of idolatry as disordered loves.

And in this passage, this is the issue of disordered loves. In verse one they say, who will go before us? And that packed phrase, who will go before us, translates to this, who will lead us into the promised land to get the goods that God had promised us? We don't want to stay here at the mountain. We don't want to sit here and wait for the rules for the commandments of the Lord. We need something else that's going to go before us that's going to take us into the promised land that's going to give us the temporal blessings that God had promised. And so the sin beneath the sin, the deep desire here in Israel is security. What they really want, what provokes them to make this golden calf is that they want security. They want stability. They want to eat. They want to drink. They want to get to the promised land and get that milk and honey that they were promised. That's what they want. And that's what they're trying to get through disordered worship here. And so in verse one it says that they gather themselves. They rise up against. It's a mob mentality here. And the issue is that they feel vulnerable. And that makes sense. They were slaves in Egypt for 400 years. And when you're a slave in a foreign country for 400 years, the biggest issue in your life is the practicals. How are you going to eat? How are you going to drink? How are you going to protect your family against the slavers? How are you going to provide? And that's the big issue. And it's carried over into this passage. It's the thing that they're still worried about.

[19 : 05] And so what they're doing is they're trying to make a golden calf that will get them out of there into the promised land that will basically manipulate Yahweh, the God who redeemed them, to help them get to what they want to get to as fast as possible. And so objectively they are God's people. They've been redeemed. They've been taken through the Red Sea. Objectively they are God's people. But subjectively they don't desire God. They don't want God. Objectively they are the redeemed people of God. But subjectively they don't know who they are. They don't want the God who redeemed them. And that is why probably they pick a bull calf to be their representation. Because the bull calf in ancient Egypt was a symbol of power over your enemy. It was a mediator who would bring you fertility, economic goods, wealth, prosperity. And so that's what they want. That's what they're trying to get out of Yahweh as fast as they possibly can. One pastor puts it this way, the temptation here is that they want redemption without any dedication. They want redemption without dedication. Their first love here is not the God who redeemed them. It's not so they're not willing to be patient to look for him, to wait for his command, to listen to his instruction. They want to get what they can get as fast as they can.

Now in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul says, Paul quotes from Exodus 32 and he says, this event was recorded as an example for us. Meaning all Christians, anybody who's in the church in the New Testament era, this is an example for us. And he says, so that you would take care lest you fall into the same idolatry, into the deep sin. Some theologians have called it deep idolatry and you can define it like this. It's loving something more than God. But it's not necessarily loving bad things. It's loving good things so much that you make them bad. It's an issue of disordered love. It's loving something before God so much that you actually turn a good thing into a bad thing. It's taking the goods of comfort, of power, of security, of entertainment, of romance, of a spouse, the hope of a spouse, a girlfriend or a boyfriend, your children, your body, fitness, beauty, a successful career, sports, and making those things into something that if you lost them, if they failed you, if they got out of your grip, that it would that it would crush you, that it would take away your meaning in life. And Israel loves security more than they love the God who redeemed them. They weren't interested in getting to know him. Their first love was milk and honey. But the

Bible says that every single human being was created for God and that it's only in dwelling with the God who created you that you can actually have the hope, the meaning in life, the identity that won't crush you, that won't disappoint you, that can't be taken away. The most devastating thing actually with deep idolatry is that as human beings we chase and we chase after these things, but the most devastating thing is if you actually get it, if you actually get the idol that you want, and then you find out you wake up the next morning and everything's still the same, life is still mediocre. The worst thing that can possibly happen is you actually get the idol that you're chasing after. Tim Keller in his book about this, Counterfeit Gods, he cites a woman, a journalist named Cynthia Hymal. This is a woman who lived in Manhattan. She knew, she knew celebrities before they were cool. She knew celebrities when they were waitresses and baristas and you know the normal people stuff. And this is what she writes about them in one article, I pity celebrities. No, I really do. They were once perfectly pleasant human beings, but now their wrath is awful. They were, they pushed and the morning after each of them became famous, they wanted to take an overdose. Because that giant thing that they were striving for, that thing that was going to make everything okay in life, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide for them personal fulfillment and happiness, it had happened and they were still there the next morning. I think, and she says, and this is not true, but this is precisely her point, I think when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you, he grants you your deepest wish. In other words, if you actually get what you want in life, if you get what you want, if you make it an idol, it almost always disappoints you. David

Foster Wallace, he's a very, he was a very famous American novelist that many of you have heard of. He gave an address at Kenyon College in 2005, a commencement speech that became very famous pretty quickly. This is, he's not a Christian, he's not religious at all, and this is what he says and he nails it.

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships, the only choice we get is what to worship, and the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God, a spiritual type thing to worship like Jesus Christ as Christians do, is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in your life, then you will never have enough. You will, you will never feel like you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age starts showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fears. Worship your intellect being seen as smart by others and you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the worst thing about it all, about all these forms of worship, is that they're unconscious. They are default settings for every human being and they're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into day after day. Now David Foster Wallace, he committed suicide not long after this and a lot of people speculate that he committed suicide perhaps over one of these idols that failed him on this list in life and threw him into the pits of depression. But this is amazing insight and this is all of us. The golden calf is pretty obscure. It's pretty ancient sounding. But Calvin nailed it in the most famous quote, perhaps the most cliché Calvin quote, that the human heart is an idol factory, always looking to worship something more than God. But even more than Calvin, more important than Calvin. John in the book of First

[26 : 52] John, one of the great books that pronounces the gospel that God loves us at the very end, the last verse of the book of First John, he says, little children, little children, keep yourselves from idolatry. He's talking to the church, little children, it's such an honest statement, little children, keep yourselves from idolatry. He knew the truth about us. And so they're just as we come to start to close, there's two key questions to ask yourself about your idols. And the first is this, what is the most fundamental object in your life that gives you basic meaning, that gives you self-worth, that gives you a reason to get out of bed? But because David Foster Wallace was right, that most of our idols are unconscious to us, it's just our default setting. Actually, we all know this, other people can see it better than we can. And you know that you can see the idol in your friend and your spouse better than they can. You can see it, but oftentimes we can't see it. And so here's a more revealing question. What is it in your life that if you lost it, you would feel like you had lost all meaning, that you had lost a reason to live, that you had lost hope, that you had lost purpose. In other words, what are your nightmares about? What do you fear the most? And look, this is what creaturely idols do. They say to you, chase after me, chase after me, perform for me, dance for me, dance before me like the golden calf, and I will give you happiness, I will give you security, I will give you hope. And then when you get them, they break your heart, they always slip out of your hand, and they have to because no created thing can bear the weight of the meaning of a human being's entire life. No created thing can bear the weight of true meaning, true hope, true happiness, because God created every single human being to only find true hope and happiness in him. And you can't put that on a creature. You can't put that on your spouse, you can't put that on your children, you can't put that on your career, you can't put that into sports, you can't put that into any success in this life. None of the things can bear it. They will leave you, they will slip out of your hand, and it will crush you. It will force a million deaths, as David Foster Wallace says, as they fade away. And so, in Psalm 106, which quotes from this passage, in Romans 1, which quotes from this passage, in 1 Corinthians 7, which quotes from this passage, and in Exodus 32, every single instance, they all say the same exact thing, that idolatry deserves judgment. That idolatry deserves the judgment of

God. We read about it in the passage. It's front and center that God came down in wrath and judgment against the people. And as modern people, it's difficult for us to swallow that, but it's actually quite reasonable, if you think about it. If God is truly the creator of the world, if God is truly absolute, if God is the creator of all that is good, of all that is right, and if idolatry is truly a sin, a disordered love against his person, then it makes sense that the God who is just, the God who demands justice, requires justice in the face of idolatry. We wouldn't expect anything less of any reasonable society, but keeping the laws of justice. It's foundational to any life, and we can't expect anything less from God. God is just, and idolatry is cosmic crime. It demands justice. It demands justice throughout the whole Torah, throughout the first five books of the Bible, and every single person knows that in their conscious, because of guilt consciousness, that they need to be perfect, that they should be perfect before the absolute God who created the universe, and that they aren't, that they're idolaters. And the only hope in this passage is not going after a false mediator, but clinging to the true one, the mediator that God had actually chosen. Now if you look down at Exodus 32, 32, this is the last thing we'll say, and we'll close. After the people had sinned,

Moses recognizes that this is a great sin, and so he comes to God in verse, in chapter 32 verse 32, and says, Lord, if you will forgive them, forgive them. But if you were just, if you cannot just forgive them, blot me out of the book of life.

Instead of them. That's true mediation. That's true love. That's substitution.

Moses comes to God and says, they deserve death. Take me. Blot me out of the book of your people. Instead of them, I'll take what they deserve. Put it on me.

[32 : 05] That's called substitution. Keller also, and this is truly the thing we're going to close on, I promise. I've said that twice now. Keller, in this book, Counterfeit Gods, he tells the story of a woman who he ministered to in Manhattan, and he writes that she was cursed by the great curse of extreme beauty. She was unbelievably beautiful. He says in a way that was just, was just different. And because of that, her whole life, she had been surrounded by men, as you would expect. And men had always chased after her, and it became something in her life that became a deep idol for her, is getting male affection, and always having a man no matter who it might be at her side. And a lot of men of power in New York chased after her because of her beauty. And for that reason, she put down her barriers. She wasn't selective in who she was willing to date and to be with, and that resulted in violence. And she was abused on multiple occasions. It created a life of extreme issues, drug abuse, psychological problems, and finally prison for her. And it all broke down in the end, and she became a

Christian. And after that, she went to a therapist. She was seeing a therapist, and she told Tim about this therapy as her pastor. And so she went to the therapist, and the therapist said to her, you, your whole life, have based your self-image, your self-worth, on male affection, on needing a man by your side to give you meaning. And she said, yeah, that's right. Totally, I have. And he said, and because of that, you've not been able to find any sense of dignity. You've not been able to find a sense of worth of meaning. You're hopeless because all these men in your life have failed you. They have not been good saviors, if you will. And she said, of course, yeah, that's exactly what happened to me. And he said, so here's what I want you to do. You need to cast that idol away, and you need to go get yourself a career. You need to go get a successful career, become a career woman. And only then, when you're standing on your own two feet, not dependent on anybody else, will you finally find meaning in life, will you finally find your purpose and your self-esteem. You need a career. That's the only thing that's going to save you. And this is what she said. Look, I appreciate all that you've done for me as a therapist, but what you're telling me is you want me to trade one typical idol, the idol of male affection, for another typical idol, the idol of career success. And she said, what if instead, instead of getting self-esteem from a man's love, instead of getting self-esteem, myself worth my meaning in life from a career, what if I don't want an addiction, any addiction, to drive my meaning and purpose in life? What if I want an identity that's not based on my performance? And then she read, he says, Colossians chapter 3, in

Christ your life has been hidden with God, and she came to realize something that every time that men came into her life, they said, you for me, you sacrificed your life for me so that you can give me power. And she had never read before about a man, a true mediator, an object worthy of worship, a savior that came in and said, not you for me, but I'll come in and say me for you. I'll sacrifice myself for you so that you can have meaning, so that you can have an identity, a true identity. And in Exodus 32, the true mediator, the mediator that God had chosen comes and says, blot me out, you take me instead of them. That's love. He was only a shadow. He was only a shadow. I know a better mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, who said you for me. Who said me for you. Me for you. Get that right. That's important. There is only one mediator under heaven, only one mediator in all the universe that can give you meaning, and it's only in faith, repentance, rest, and dedication to God in Christ that you can find a God, a mediator that will not crush you and disappoint you and leave you. Okay, it's only in Jesus Christ that you can stand underneath the dark mountain, the uncertain mountain, the mountain where you do not know what's gonna happen to you in life and find some certainty. Let's pray. Father, we thank you, O God, for Jesus Christ, the mediator, and we thank you for the example set before us in Exodus 32. Keep us from idols, O Lord, and turn our hearts to the only hope that can keep us before the dark mountain in patience. We pray for this in Christ's name. Amen.