

E X O D U S

v o l u m e 3

Idolatry (Exodus 32)

Bottom Line: Idols rob our hearts from worshiping the one true God.

What does it mean to idolize someone? What does that look like? Have you ever idolized anyone in your life? If so, who and why?

Sometimes, we use the word “idol” to mean someone we look up to or whose behavior we wish to imitate. Some people idolize their parents, or perhaps a movie star, or maybe even one of their sports heroes. Though this kind of admiration is not necessarily bad, it can often lead to great disappointment when we find out our heroes all have clay feet. Today, we are going to study about a more sinister form of idolatry—casting an image in the place of God. We will explore how this terrible event came to pass, and why it is that the Lord gets so angry when we make idols for ourselves.

Read Exodus 32:1-6. What god did Aaron attempt to make with his golden calf? Why do you think the people of Israel desired a physical object to worship in the first place? What is the problem with having an idol?

Aaron attempted to make a likeness of the God of Israel, Yahweh, with his golden calf. Notice that he declares in verse 4, “this is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” And in verse 5, Aaron says that “there will be a festival to the LORD (Yahweh) tomorrow.” Aaron wasn’t trying to make another god, he was trying to represent the God of Israel. The people of Israel were not walking by faith. They doubted that Moses would return. They wanted something tangible to look at like the rest of the nations, so they wanted an idol. They wanted leadership, someone to follow, and since Moses was gone and they didn’t understand who God is, they demanded an idol. The problem with idols is that they misrepresent God. Idols inevitably twist God into our own images and projections of what we want Him to be like—not for who He truly is.

It didn’t take much for the people of Israel to be led away into sin. Are we more resistant to idol worship than they were? What do our idols look like today? When do you find you are most likely to create an idol?

The scariest thing about this incident of idol worship is that the people pretended, or thought, that they were actually worshiping the one true God who had delivered them out of Egypt. This should serve as a cautionary reminder of how easily we can be led astray into false worship, and how quickly we can abandon God for an image of God that we have created ourselves.

Has there been a time when you have idolized an object or tradition that celebrated God, instead of God Himself? Explain.

How are all idols mere imitations of the one true God?

Read Exodus 32:7-14

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What do you think of God’s declaration that He would destroy the people of Israel and make Moses a great nation? How would you have reacted to this situation if you were Moses? What does Moses’ prayer teach us about prayer?

The Lord’s declaration that He is about to destroy Israel is shocking! These are the people He promised to deliver from slavery and to make into a great nation; these were the descendants of His friend Abraham. Yet the sin of idolatry was so wicked that God was ready to wipe the people off the face of the earth. Idolatry is no small sin! Moses’ prayer teaches us several things. First, we should note that his prayer is selfless. If God wiped out Israel, Moses would be relieved of the duty of leading them. In addition, God promised that Moses’ own children would be made into a great nation. But Moses loved God, and He wanted God to get the glory for Israel’s deliverance. Moses’ prayer encourages us to remind the Lord of the promises that He has made. The Lord certainly doesn’t forget His promises, but He teaches us here to have them on our minds and hearts when we pray. Indeed, the Lord will be quick to honor His promises.

Read Exodus 32:15-25. Why do you think Moses ground the golden calves into powder and made the Israelites drink it (v. 20)? Why is it important that we acknowledge our sins and the effects that they have on our relationship with God?

What do you think of Aaron’s excuse to Moses regarding the golden calf? Why do you think Aaron failed?

Once Moses came down the mountain and saw the idol with his own eyes and how the people were behaving, he was livid. He smashed the idol, ground it into powder, and forced the people to drink it. Moses let the people know, quite emphatically, that idol worship was not tolerated by God. We don’t know exactly why Moses had the Israelites “drink their sin,” but it is likely that the intent was to help the Israelites wake up to the reality of their sin and its results.

Aaron failed as a leader. Verse 25 says, “Moses saw that the people were out of control, for Aaron had let them get out of control.” Aaron failed in his task because he feared the people more than he feared the Lord. This is evident in his response when he blames the people, “You yourself know that the people are intent on evil.” Verse 4 tells us that Aaron “fashioned it with an engraving tool,” but he tried to pretend to Moses that it magically came out of the fire looking like a calf. The lesson for us is that no one is exempt from idol worship. Therefore, we must remain vigilant.

Most people don’t worship objects made of gold, wood, and stone but that doesn’t mean we don’t have idols. What are some of the idols we have in our culture today? What dangers do they pose?

How has God chosen to reveal Himself to us if we cannot use idols? How can we learn more about Him?

How can we as a small group help one another recognize the idols in our own lives and fight against them?

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Reflection: Read these aloud, using your discretion about which questions should be pondered and which questions should be discussed.

It will be hard to diagnose the idols that you have replaced God with in your heart if the reality is that you have never made God the center of your life to begin with. Because we all worship something, apart from a life devoted to God, EVERYTHING you do is idolatry. Have you truly surrendered everything to the Lord and made Him supreme over your life? This includes your dreams, your aspirations, your family, your money, your everything. Until you lay everything down at the feet of Jesus and make Him the true Lord of your life, you are living in idolatry.

Aaron made a pretty terrible excuse as to how the calf came into existence. We do the same thing when we try and justify why we allow certain things other than God to have such a prominent place in our hearts. What excuses are you making? When confronted with a potential idol in your life, is your first reaction to try and justify it? Or is your first reaction to try and remove it? Will you be honest with the Lord, honest with yourself, and confess your idolatry to God, repent, and do what it takes to restore God to His rightful place in your life?

A lot of times we think of idolatry as an “all or nothing” type of sin. Either we are fully idolatrous or we’re not. Either God is supreme over all of my heart or He’s not supreme over any of it. But it’s possible that we may at times have some areas of our lives submitted to the Lordship of Christ, but not others. What are some of the “smaller” more “compartmentalized” areas of your life that you may not be surrendering to the Lord? Your finances? Your marriage? Your relationship with food? Your reputation? Your desire for possessions? What have you looked to as supreme in those areas other than God? What does it look like to replace those idols with God? How would your finances, marriage, etc., look different if God were in control of those areas of your life?

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