

Exodus 32 (1-6) – False Worship of the True God

In Exodus 32:28, you see that 3000 people died in one day. They were killed as a consequence of the false worship of a golden calf. When people don't do worship in the way God prescribes, it is false worship. And false worship takes many forms, not just physical images. Indeed, it takes any form that is not formed by the word of God. And sincerity is no substitute for truth.

The context of Exodus 32 is that the people had grown impatient with Moses, and with God. Moses had gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God. And eventually, Moses came back down to the people. He had two stone tablets, containing the Ten Commandments, written with the finger of God. But the people had grown weary of waiting, and acted as if Moses wasn't coming back. And by the time Moses did come back, the people had cast off all restraint, and they were doing all sorts of wickedness, and they were knowingly violating God's Law.

Now you might think that they couldn't have been knowingly violating God's Law. They didn't know God's Law, because Moses had not come back with the Ten Commandments yet. But they did know God's Law. When Moses came down from the mountain, it wasn't the first time the people had heard God's Law. The people already knew what they weren't supposed to do. And yet they did it anyway. And that fact added to their wickedness.

Less than two months before this episode in Exodus 32, Israel heard the voice of God audibly speaking the Ten Commandments to the nation, in Exodus 20. Mount Sinai was covered in smoke, and there was thunder and lightning, and a loud trumpet sound, and the whole mountain shook. That experience was incredibly dramatic, and it caused the people to tremble in fear. God did this so that they would fear him, and keep from sin. But this experience did not change their hearts. Many of the people wanted a less demanding god. And when it seemed like Moses wouldn't come back, the people rebelled. In less than two months, the very commandments God spoke were the very commandments the people broke.

It's the same today. People feel entitled and they don't want to be encumbered. They want a god who will let them live like they want to. They reason that since they are already saved, they deserve to seek their own desires. But we need God's Law to guide us into what pleases God and to guard us against what displeases God. To forget God's Law is to forget God. The Law cannot save you, only Jesus Christ can. But the Law is good, because it drives you to your need for Jesus Christ.

Think of this episode in Exodus 32, and apply this to today. If God's Law isn't a constant and consistent part of our worship, our experience, people will drift into idolatry. No matter what prior and powerful experiences they have had. As Proverbs 29:18 says – *Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.* Let me say it this way. If there is no teaching against sin, then sin will increase. If God's standard is not held up, then there will be no repentance, and there will be rebellion.

Scripture gives differing accounts of idolatry. Sometimes idolatry is clearly the worship of false gods. But sometimes idolatry is the false worship of the true God. Consider the "high places" mentioned in 1 and 2 Kings and elsewhere. What started as outposts to worship the true God on the way to the Temple in Jerusalem quickly turned into worshipping Baal and Asherah poles. Why? Because false worship, which includes *unauthorized* worship, leads to more false worship. God called the people to come to the Temple to worship, but people decided to do it their own way. Think about this.

Worship of false gods, and false worship of the true God, are both false forms of worship. The Bible's clearest example of just how similar those two forms of false worship are is also the Bible's most famous example of idolatry in the Bible: the golden calf.

Exodus 32 looks like the worship of a false god. *"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.” (Exodus 32:1).

But there is more to this story than an obvious worship of a false god. Notice that Aaron didn't call the golden calf by the name of another god, but by the divine name (Yahweh). *And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” (Exodus 32:4–5)*

So, this seems to be both about worshiping false gods, and attempting to worship the true God, albeit falsely. The people had that incredible audio-visual experience, and they had heard the very voice of God. They had been given the Law. But they wanted something more, something new. And Aaron invokes the divine name, and consecrates a feast to this image.

Despite Aaron calling it holy, their new worship was idolatry. Despite it being labeled worship of Yahweh, God said it was something else. And you see what this false worship descended into, as the people abandoned faithfulness to God. Exodus 32:6 – *And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.* That is polite language for serious debauchery.

Exodus 32 makes it clear that your intentions don't matter when your worship isn't obedient to the clear instruction of God's Word. We commune with God through his revelation *to us*, in the Bible, not our inventions or intentions or improvements. Sincerity is no substitute for truth. And we are often not nearly as sincere as we think we are in the first place.

The Apostle Paul applies this to us in 1 Corinthians 10:1-14, which we read this morning. His point is that what happened to the people in the wilderness is an example and a warning for us. The temptations of sinful, false worship before a holy God are real, but we don't have to fall into greater

sin. We are vulnerable, but we can be victorious, if we will take heed and flee from idolatry. Flee, run like a monster is chasing you. Because it is.

Idolatry includes false worship of the true God. And the Bible says that worship of a god made according to our tastes is exactly that, idolatrous. And that includes failing to hold up God's standard, failing to preach against sin, and failing to proclaim the wrath of a holy God in judgment. We have a God who defines what love is. But he also defines what we must do to proclaim that love, and his just judgment of sin is part of that.

Now, about that thing that people think makes their worship right. I'm talking about sincerity. Many Christians find it hard to say someone is wrong when they *mean* well. They want to quickly add, "but your heart is good", or something like that. But Exodus 32 proves that sincerity is not the same thing as truth. Aaron trying to make the calf-worship holy shows us that good intentions are insufficient. The road to hell really is paved with good intentions. Presuming that our sincerity pleases God automatically is wrong. A statue called Yahweh is still a statue. It isn't God-honoring worship. Because God has not instituted this sort of worship.

A wrong view of God is an idolatrous view of God. This is why theology is essential to worship. Knowing God as he has revealed himself in Scripture determines your ability to truly worship him. You don't get to commune with God in some alternate way just because it makes you feel good about God. You have to come to God in the ways and means he has said you must. Doctrine isn't impractical. On the contrary, our worship depends on it. And if you think you don't need doctrine, and that you feel good about God without it, well, the blame is on you. Sincerity is no substitute for truth.

There is a false worship which calls itself Christianity. It's not the real Christianity. It's a terrible deception. You think you're truly worshiping the true God when, in reality, you're just in love with your own feelings. People think that if your worship makes you feel good, and somehow connected, then it must be good. But that isn't necessarily true. Ask the Israelites.

False worship flows from false theology. And false theology is often rooted in wrong conceptions of our relationship with God, and his purposes for us. And this misconception often happens when we misunderstand what comes after we have made peace with God.

The Bible teaches that peace with God comes through the death of Christ (Romans 5:1). And since we have peace with God, we will embrace, enjoy, and endure the sometimes-painful process of sanctification (Romans 5:2-4). We have peace with God, so now we continue in self-denying, God honoring faith. This union with God leads to leads to further communion with God (Romans 5:5). This process is part of the true worship of the true God. Holiness is your call. Communion with God is the result. Worship is deepened by real, true, properly focused, biblically grounded experience.

But the false worship of the true God teaches that since peace with God is settled, we can embrace and enjoy our preeminent goal of self-fulfillment. Faith means that you can pursue whatever earthly power and pleasures you want in the name of Christianity. Happiness is your call, your divine right. And communion with a false God is the result. And the worship of God is corrupted. It manifests itself with success as God's apparent stamp of approval. In this way, so-called Christians get to desire the things of this world while still feeling like they are close to Jesus. It's popular, and the growing echo chamber tells each other they are pleasing God, while giving license to continue our self-pursuits.

The Scriptures give a condition to following Jesus that is the complete opposite of self-pursuit: self-denial (Luke 14:27). Imagine following Jesus without having to renounce yourself; no wonder it's so popular! This version of Jesus wants for me what I want for myself – in the same manner I want it for myself but with supernatural powers to make it happen. Unfortunately, that's just what this false worship is luring so many so-called Christians into.

Many of the people who have fallen for this golden calf are well meaning people. They are passionate about social issues, generous with their time and

resources, and very involved in their churches. But they have fallen for a theological lie. The error of the false worship disguised as Christianity is this: False worship places humans and their needs at the center, instead of God.

The Israelites became impatient. They needed reassurance. They wanted something more, something new, something they could see, something that resonated with their ideas and feelings. They wanted a god who was in control, but who could also be controlled. They wanted an instrumental faith, a transactional worship. Their worship went outside the boundaries God had set. And so, their behavior followed suit.

In the Old Testament, we have more than just this instance of the golden calf. There are other times when God's people felt really good about something, but it led to disaster. For example, 1 Samuel 4-7 and the "Ichabod" episode, and 1 Chronicles 13:5-10 and the "Uzzah" episode. Everyone was in agreement, and excited, and worshipful. But it was wrong. And the people suffered. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't "feel" our worship. I'm saying that this isn't the sign we are doing it right. God's word is.

People talk about "God showing up", and for them this means people were really into the music and excited about the pastor's message on overcoming your obstacles and achieving your dreams. In that scheme, the "sin" you're convicted of is not about breaking God's Law, but about not exercising your faith. Communion with God isn't about growing in grace and obedience, it's about breaking barriers, fulfilling your desires, gaining emotional well-being, better self-image, and relational healing. This teaching reverses Biblical reality; God does work in those areas of personal growth, but that is always for the ultimate purpose of loving, serving, and enjoying *him* more.

Emotions are good, if they are driven in the right direction. People might claim they are elevating God, but we must take great care as to the content of the worship, because idolatry can feel good, bring unity, and motivate the masses. But God will judge us for false worship, believing we are worshiping God, when in reality we are only worshiping a god we created.