

Title: What did you expect?
Text: Exodus 32.1-6
Theme: Bitterness, the gateway to idolatry
Series: Exodus #48
Prop Stmt: When God does not give us what we want, we are seriously tempted to find another god.

Read Text:

I have been anticipating these three (32-34) chapters for a very long time. It is in these verses that we are taken down into some of the deepest pits of the human heart and yet, in the midst of this sad and frustrating scene we witness some bold and courageous actions on the part of some, followed by a heart-stretching display of intercession by Moses, all of which sets the stage for a truly awesome scene that is so fierce in its intensity, so sacred in its essence and so amazing in what it reveals to us about God.

This morning, as you can tell from the text, we are going to look into the pit of the human heart, and it is truly sad. I cannot overstate the reverberating impact of this event. These verses describe a crisis of immense proportions that plagued and haunted the children of Israel for literally hundreds of years. If you could go back and re-do something in your life, or re-do something in your family, many of you know exactly what that would be. There are things that have happened that have scarred and fractured and have been huge obstacles to overcome in your attempt to have a healthy and functioning relationship. Well, if there was ever an event that these people could re-do, this would be it. Exodus 32 for the children of Israel, is like Genesis 3 for the world. The consequences are generational. And I am begging you to listen to this with all of your heart, because some of you hearing me today are on the verge of making generational-impacting decisions.

Here is what I mean. This text tells us the story of the children of Israel creating a false god (calf) out of gold, and then worshiping it. This blatant act of idolatry revealed a problem that would define most of their history until they were either destroyed or deported 900 years later. Joshua told them to get rid of their gods. The 400 years of the judges was a time of apostasy and idolatry. The latter part of Solomon's reign was marked by idolatry. Jeroboam took the 10 northern tribes and split off from Judah and established two centers of worship (Dan and Bethel) – PP 1 Kings 12, each having a calf made out of gold set up in place of God. The northern kingdom spent their entire history in idolatry until the Assyrians finally destroyed them. In spite of having the temple, the southern kingdom kept falling back into idolatry and again and again until God finally deported them to Babylon. Go with me to 586 BC. The northern kingdom is gone. The temple in Jerusalem is smoldering rubble, huge sections of the city wall have gaping holes and major sections of the city are burned out shells. Historically, the grip of idolatry that seemed almost impossible to break began here, Exodus 32.

Why is this such a big deal? Why did God say over and over, “no other gods before me”? Is God that jealous, that insecure, and that fearful of competition that he goes cosmic over some little idol? We have already explored some of this in looking at the

first two commandments. And this morning we could revisit some of that and remember that God did not allow himself to be portrayed as an idol because the divine presence could not be contained in, nor accurately reflected in an image. We could remember that God did not reveal himself in any physical form to Israel, because to portray him in a way that he did not reveal himself would be to present him as being someone or something that he is not. We could also remember that an idol is part of the creation. It is made of wood, stone, or some sort of metal. Idols confuse the distinction that exists between the Creator and the creation. We could also discuss the fact that Israel's God is different from all of the other gods of the nations around them. The gods of the surrounding nations had to be carried from place to place, while God is already there. All of these points are worthy of attention. But in our study, I am going to focus mostly on one of the strings of this banjo and play it over and over and over in hopes that it will become a truth that is forever engraved into your heart.

Referring to idols, Psalm 115.8 says, ***“Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.”***

Here is what this text reveals. Here is the fountain of this polluted and toxic stream that poisons hundreds of generations. It is summarized in this statement. You become what you worship! When you worship something that is spiritually dead, you will become spiritually dead. When you worship something that is harsh, cruel, manipulating and demanding, you will become harsh, cruel, manipulating and demanding. But, when you worship the true God, you will become a reflection of the true God. Therefore, you become what you worship, either for your destruction, or for your restoration. God demands your true worship because he is so infinitely and fiercely zealous for your joy.

I love how Christopher Wright put it. *“Since God’s mission is to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessings that he desires for it, God battles against all forms of idolatry and calls us to join him in that conflict.”*¹ God battles against all forms of idolatry because idols will steal your joy. They will steal your life. They will suck all of the hope and security out of you by promising you that which they cannot deliver! When we think of idolatry, we tend to think of images or icons which can be a physical expression of them. And you may naively think, that just because you do not have a Buddha or a Hindu god or other icon in your home that this does not really pertain to you. The truth is, an idol is that which our heart clings to or relies upon for ultimate security. The idols in our lives are revealed when I sin in order to get them, or when I sin if I don't.

Now to the text. The flow of this chapter is marked by a series of confrontations; Aaron and the people, God and Moses, Moses and the people, Moses and Aaron, Moses and the Levites all of which builds up to Moses going before God as the intercessor for the people. In v.7, God says to Moses that they are “your people.” While in v.11 Moses responds that they are “your people” and in v.31 they are called “this (or these) people”. It is a stylistic feature that underscores the whole issue that is at stake. Whose people are these, because they are certainly not acting like the Lord's! It all starts in verse 1, which

¹ C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God IVP*, 2006, pp. 187-88.

is absolutely stunning. It is inexplicable. It seems so completely out of nowhere. If you are reading this account for the very first time, you would need to examine the book that you are holding to make sure that someone did not replace your book or insert something into the one you had. You want to rub your eyes in disbelief. These were the people who fell back from the mountain in fear. These were the people who trembled before the voice of God and vowed upon pain of death that they would obey everything that God had said. Over and over they said this, and the covenant that God made with them was then ratified in chapter 24 by means of a sacrifice and then a meal. Right after this the leaders of Israel sat in the very presence of God (under his feet) and ate and drank in enjoyment and security and in the knowledge that this awesome Creator who had heard their cries in Egypt, and had delivered them with such an awesome display of power was now setting his name on them and marking them as his own. When that was over, the leaders went back to the people while Moses was called by God to the top of the mountain where he was given the details concerning the construction of the tabernacle. For weeks now, we have studied this amazing structure and have marveled at its purpose and message. If only these people would have listened. If only they would have believed all that God really had in store for them. If only they would have banked upon his goodness and stopped to consider all that he had already done for them. But they didn't. What happened? What happened seems so inexplicable until we stop and consider our own lives.

How do you respond when your expectations go unfulfilled? The rest of this message is based on two points: 1) Warning and 2) Wooing. Here is the warning. Do any of these responses sound familiar?

When I don't get what I think I deserve I...

a. Have the right to forget about God (v.1)

The children of Israel did not think Moses or God were moving fast enough for their liking. So, just like that, they decided that they needed a new leader and new God. I recognize that the main point of this is not what happens to Moses, but he is a factor in the story. Here is the guy who has risked everything to come back and rescue them, and has had incredible success. And in a matter of 40 days, they throw him under the bus. "As for this fellow Moses" (NIV) "As for this Moses" (ESV), their language has become so impersonal, so discarding, like they were talking about a used egg carton that they were throwing into the recycle bin. "We don't know what has happened to him" (And we aren't going to do anything about it.) There is a shocking lack of concern. They don't care. They are totally flippant about his welfare. Brothers and sisters, that is such a difficult reality to deal with and I could spend more time identifying the personal impact of that, because this harsh reality is part of the backdrop that later on makes the intercession of Moses for these people so truly amazing. And while we will not get to that part this morning, I want you to remember to where this text is flowing. But what is even more distressing is how flippant they are about God.

"Come make us gods who will go before us."

Wait a minute! What happened to the God who heard your cries in bondage? What happened to the God who rescued you when you could not rescue yourself? What happened to the God, who clothed you and gave you the spoils of Egypt? What happened to the God who parted the Red Sea a few weeks back and destroyed the most powerful army in that day, and brought you through on dry ground? What happened to the God who every day provided Manna from heaven, who gave you water out of the rock when you were thirsty and who defeated the Amalekite army? How can you forget? We forget when we chose to focus on what we think we ought to have instead of what God has already done.

Brothers and sisters, this is why we have to preach the gospel to ourselves every single day. We are so prone to think that God owes us something good, when the truth is, if God were only just and righteous, he would owe us and rightfully give us hell. When we stop considering all that God has done for us, then we convince ourselves that we have a right to reject God.

b. Have the right to reject God (v.1)

“Come, make us gods.” Make us gods, because our expectation is that we need to be moving faster than this. We are just sitting here at the base of this mountain and we never realized that this was going to happen. What unfulfilled expectations do you have?

God did not give me a good husband. God did not heal my son. God did not restore my health. God did not _____ (fill in the blank). When we think that we are not appreciated, not affirmed, not understood, not treated fairly, we think that somehow we now have the right to disobey God. I just lost my job, so I now I can go get drunk. My spouse just cheated on me, so now I can go cheat on her. The judge just ruled against me, therefore, I have the right to hate God.

c. Have the right to replace God (v.1)

Over and over I have told you that sin causes brain damage. When I think that I have the right to forget, reject and then replace God, I will always replace him with something that is inferior, because he is the greatest! But, that is not what we are thinking – is it? We are thinking that I will get for myself a god who is not so demanding, not so picky and will, by all means do that which I want. This last God did not give me the life that I wanted, so I will sell myself to one that will. Result: I will make for myself a god who will do what I want!

That spirit of entitlement so quickly becomes a root of bitterness that grows into a life of idolatry. You become what you worship either for your destruction, or for your restoration. What do you look to for your ultimate security? What do you turn to when you are under pressure? Do you rely on food? Do you rely on cigarettes? Do you rely on pornography? Do you try to escape with romance novels, sports, or money? What is it for you? For Israel it was a calf made out of gold. They exchanged the glory of God

for a cow that, as the Psalmist described it, eats grass. How's that for a god? They worshiped something that eats where it defecates. Brilliant! But that is all that we can come with. Over and over the Bible describes idols as having eyes, but cannot see, ears but cannot hear, mouths but cannot speak. And those who worship them, become so blind that they cannot see what they are doing to their own lives, deaf that they cannot listen to reason, and dead, in that they are powerless to get themselves out of the bondage in which they are in. If you go into one of Detroit's casinos in the middle of the day – what do you see? Young, hip, urban sophisticates, smartly dressed, living fast, loving life, and hitting it big? No, what you see is zombie-like faces, with glazed over eyes, staring at the one-armed bandits, to which they are giving their souls, one quarter at a time, some of whom so afraid that they will miss the jackpot if they leave, that they soil their own clothes while they play away until every last quarter is gone. Then they hate it and are embarrassed to admit to their children or grandchildren what they have done.

And that is half of why God warns his people so severely about the sin of idolatry. But there is another reason why idolatry is hated by God. God does not want you to become like lifeless idols because he has made you to become like his Son. Please, stop and consider the awesome weight of that truth. God's Son, Jesus Christ, is the most glorious, the most satisfied, the most joyful, the most fulfilled, the most content, the most loving, the most merciful, gracious, truthful and complete person ever! That is what God wants you to become like! God is so fiercely committed to your completeness in Christ, he is so intensely committed to you becoming supremely happy and infinitely full of pleasure, that he commands you to stay away from that which will destroy you so that you will worship Him with the result that you will look like and believe like and be like Jesus Christ. God's glory is best put on display by our glad surrender and passionate worship and faith-driven obedience. No one loves you like Jesus, and no one but Jesus can make your heart so big and so full either. Brothers and sisters, that is where the battle for the affections of our hearts is fought. We are so easily swayed into thinking that God is holding out on us, which is why we settle for so little. Why would you settle for a cow, when you can have Christ? That is why you need to read and pray the gospel every day.

In Exodus 32, when the covenant that God made with his people was only a few days old, his people broke it. Here is why this chapter is so distressing. The view that we are given of the human heart is a mirror. We are law-breaking, covenant-breaking people. We make promises to God that we find reasons to forget, reject and then replace; sometimes within moments of making the promise. We need a Savior, who will rescue us from our sin and from ourselves. We need a God who will give us a new heart and will keep us. We need a Redeemer who will pay our debt in full. We need an infinite Sacrifice that through his death will withstand and absorb and exhaust the righteous wrath of God against our sin until there is nothing left to be poured out against us. We need an Intercessor who will stand as our advocate, in our defense, in our place who understands us and pleads our case. We need a God who is rich in mercy, willing to forgive, and who will establish a new and everlasting covenant that cannot ever be broken. Israel broke, restored, broke, restored, broke, restored, and broke this first covenant. 1500 years later, Christ was sitting with his disciples in the upper room and he

told them, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. The new covenant cannot and will not be broken.
Come to life.