

Unholy Cow (Exodus 32:1-20)

What is God's mission and purpose statement for the book of Exodus? 9:16: *'for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth'*

- Egypt was the world's superpower, but God showed His power to them and to the world
 - God's end game wasn't delivering slaves in 1 nation, it's delivering sinners in all nations
- Israel was to be God's *'treasured possession among all peoples...a kingdom of priests'* (19:5-6)
- But as we come to ch 32, the high priest Aaron takes their treasures to make a golden calf
 - Instead of being priests and proclaimers to the world, they're like the people of the world
- Some call this 'unholy cow'¹ – where worship and witness is compromised

- If you would turn to Ex 32, today we come to the end of a mountain-top experience for Moses
- He's been above with a God he loves in glory but below those he knows are another story
 - He's been up in the clouds literally, but it will go downhill fast to Israel's lowest point
 - Some of you can think back to spiritual high-points (new believer, a camp or conference)
 - Maybe a higher elevation or environment or enjoyment of God, but then you came down
 - We can't stay on a mountain top, we go back to reality, back to a real world of sin below²
 - From ch 21-31 Moses has been close to God's holy presence hearing God's audible voice
 - But in ch 32, God tells him to go down with the tablets, and all will come crashing down
 - The people could still see the holy cloud where he went but haven't seen him for 40 days
 - When the teacher is away, the children play. Meanwhile back at the ranch, or the camp...

32:1 *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."* ² *So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."* ³ *So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.* ⁴ *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!"* ⁵ *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."* 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. [there's an old song 'go down, Moses, let my people go.' This is a bit different]* ⁷ *And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.* ⁸ *They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them.*

- In 20:23 God commanded *'you shall not make...gods of gold'*—but how quickly they fell!
- For many chapters, He called Israel *'my people,'* now He calls them *'your people'* in v. 7
- Is it like a father telling his wife *'your child needs attention'* (this is your responsibility)?
- Or to me *'you need to deal with your son'* (i.e., 'he's acting like your side of the family')
- Sometimes my wife or I ask each other what happened. The answer: "children" (whose?)
- The question in Ex 32: whose children are these? Will God the Father disown or destroy?

⁹ *And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people [think stubborn children who won't submit].* ¹⁰ *Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."* ¹¹ *But Moses implored the LORD his God...*

OUTLINE: 1. Israel's sin and ours (v. 1-6)

2. God's response and ours (v. 7-14)

3. Scripture's solution to our idols (v. 15-20)

- First, this isn't just about Israel's sin. As we dig into this, we'll excavate what's deep in us, too
- I'm not tempted to bow to a cow, I'm tempted to eat too much cow, but there's more here
 - America's idols may look different, but as we study Israel's idols, we're not so different
- Let's start in the context of their sin and ours. Turn to ch 20, the 10 commandments from God:
- Israel heard God thunder these words from heaven along with lightning and earthquakes
- 20:1** *God spoke all these words, saying, ² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt...*
- But those who heard that say in ch 32 'this Moses brought us out of the land of Egypt...'
 - They're already substituting what God said and did, making it about man (like we can)
 - To a man-made calf, 32:5 'these are your gods, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt'
 - Do we look to what's less than God to deliver as only God can (more subtle substitute)?
- ³ *"You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness...*
- In ch 32 Israel says 'make gods to go before,' and Aaron makes a carved image of a calf!
 - How can they 40 days later? How can we disobey right after hearing or reading scripture?
 - Impatience tempted Israel, we can wait less and sinfully worry or take into our own hands
- ⁷ *"You shall not take the name of the LORD [Yahweh] your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless*
- Aaron took up the name Yahweh for the calf in 32:5, he said in vain 'a feast to Yahweh'!
 - Aaron won't be held guiltless, he'll need his guilt to be dealt with for misusing the name
- Aaron also declared tomorrow a holy day unto the Lord, as if man can make a Sabbath (v. 8-11)
- ¹⁴ *"You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ "You shall not steal. ¹⁶ "You shall not bear false witness...*
- They're bearing false witness that these gods represented by a cow were their deliverers
 - Stealing, taking wrongly? God had actually designated the gold to be given to His house
 - Gold from Egypt was God's designated gift that they're using for unauthorized purposes
 - Israel craved visible gods like neighboring nations had, that's coveting (violating v. 17)
 - What about v. 14, committing adultery? Ex 32 maybe had immodest or immoral dancing³
 - After drinking they rose up to *play*, a word Genesis uses for foreplay / sexual 'sporting'⁴
 - Potiphar's wife in Egypt used this word in sexual allegation, 'Joseph *made a play* for me'
 - Drunkenness leads to debauchery, drinking parties to revelry, dancing sensually, more?
 - No doubt parents were dishonored and anarchy could lead to killing if this riot kept going
 - The 10 Commandments are all connected like dominoes, they fall together (James 2:10)

By God's law we all sin and fall short and are guilty

- So go back to ch 32, but Aaron sin isn't substitution, it's syncretism (mixing religious elements)
- He doesn't correct Israel's call for plural gods, he confuses/combines it by biblical terms
 - Aaron doesn't call the calf 'your gods,' he only makes 1 and calls it Yahweh (true God)?
 - Our friends in Indonesia see believers worship Christ, but bring in paganism or pantheism
 - I grew up in the Philippines where they bow to and pray to Mary statues to get to Christ
 - Aaron might've thought we're worshipping God, this is just a worship aid for our culture
 - A young bull was a visual aid to signify deity in Egypt and Canaan, or what deity sat on⁵
 - Later cultures portray deity sitting on a throne, but ancient pagans saw gods riding a bull⁶
 - Aaron might've justified 'this is a gold throne for God, to remind us to worship the King'

⁵ *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." [Yahweh] ⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings [biblical offerings]. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.*

Mixing biblical and extrabiblical worship is dangerous, idolatrous, can turn sensuous

- Don't think you're better, don't say 'I would never,' James 1 says look in the Word as a mirror
- In different ways we have the same sin as Israel and need the same Savior for our hearts

Acts 7:39 ‘...in their hearts they turned to Egypt,⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us...

- That’s God-inspired NT commentary on Israel saying that: the sin starts in a heart turning
- God brought Israel out of Egypt through the red sea, it’s another to get Egypt out of Israel
- Their hearts turned back to the way of their culture where they grew up, and so can ours
- Don’t we want to trust things we can see, even if they’re different than what Israel trusts?
- I’ve said before America has ‘in God we trust’ on our money and money is a god we trust
- Whatever you most trust, love or rely on above and apart from the true God is a false one
- Ezekiel 14 warns Jew and Gentile taking idols into their hearts, repent of idols (v. 3-11)

We idolize sex, success, rest, respect, etc. – even what can be good can become a god

Calvin said a heart is an idol-factory. His favorite apostle Paul said ‘*greed...is idolatry*’ (Col 3:5)⁷

- Idolatry isn’t only graven images, it’s also what I greedily imagine or make too much of
- It’s not just animals we carve, it’s anything we crave in a way we should only desire God

Ex 32 isn’t just about a golden calf, it’s about a God of wrath who we must not remake as safe

- We don’t make gods of cows today, but can make in our mind a God without this wrath
- ‘My God is a God of love...’, ‘I like to think of God as...’ (appears good like gold looks)
- You may not worship statues, but you worship self or rate worship by what you want in it
- We have sacred cows today or ways we want to bring old ways or ours alongside God’s
- I don’t sacrifice to creatures, but for creature-comforts I’m tempted to give up relationally
- How quickly I look away from my Creator above to created things that bring me down

Rom 1 says that’s a universal problem with sin, the created over the Creator

In v. 4 it says Aaron fashioned a calf, same verb in Gen 2 for God creating and fashioning man⁸

- It’s been said in the beginning God made man in His image, but we try to return the favor
- Steve Lawson wrote Made in Our Image: What Will We Do With a User-Friendly god?
 - o We may not fashion a calf, but can fashion half-truths, partial attributes, small god
 - o We can shave off rough edges of what scripture says, what’s offensive our culture
 - o If you’re tempted to think you’re above what Israel does, that’s stiff-necked pride

The story is familiar to many of us, and it should be more familiar for us in how our hearts sin

- o I can fall when I get impatient, don’t wait on the Lord, want deity on my timetable
- o You can speak disrespectfully of leaders like v. 1 or gang up on others your agenda
- o Like Aaron, we give in but should know better, or try to make sin sound spiritual
- o We can corrupt worship to make it about what we want, bring in our culture’s way

This is #1. Israel’s sin and ours, but we need to see 2ndly: what is God’s response (v. 7-14)

I read v. 7 earlier, ‘go down, Moses,’ and v. 8 tells him what’s going down. ⁹ *And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”*

- God’s sees stubborn stiff necks that won’t bow to His holiness and wrath is His response
- In v. 7 He calls it corrupting themselves, or v. 8, turning aside from commanded worship

Heb 12:28-29: *let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*

- Not ‘was’ in the OT, ‘is a consuming fire’ still in the NT, to revere and fear in worship
- God is dead serious about worship being done rightly and only the way He’s commanded
- His wrath is prepared to consume all Israel and start over with a new nation from Moses
- Instead of ‘my people,’ He calls them ‘this people,’ and says He’ll make a new people
- He said He’d make a great nation from Abraham and now offers to start over with Moses

If Moses thought ‘ministry is great, except for people’ – here’s his chance?!

Will Moses accept this offer? All those rebellious critics wiped out and a great nation of Moses?

¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against **your people, whom you have brought** out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ” ¹⁴ And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on **his people**. [PTL they’re still ‘his people,’ not just ‘this people,’ not the people of Moses]

- God is not repenting, He’s relenting and responding to prayer which does change things
 - God doesn’t change His nature, but the Hebrew can mean ‘moved to pity/compassion’⁹
 - God is not a man to change His mind like I do (‘I was wrong, I’m changing my position’)
 - Israel is in the wrong, God’s position doesn’t change, but He offers mercy to wrongdoers
 - Israel is dead wrong, should be dead, would be dead, but for intervention and intercession
 - I think God is inviting Moses’ interaction by how He speaks in v. 10: ‘*let me alone, that...*’
- God doesn’t need to ask man to let Him do anything but He lets Moses in on this so Moses asks
- The next chapter explains God spoke to Moses as a friend (33:11), friends expect a reply

One commentary explains v. 10 ‘telling Moses to step aside, God made it clear that Moses was the only thing standing between Israel and destruction. But Moses accepted this responsibility and became the great intercessor for the people.’¹⁰ God has sovereign grace and answers prayer

- God chose Moses to deliver Israel by grace. Ps 106:23: *he said he would destroy them— **had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.***
- To lead a selfish stiff-necked people will take a selfless person with head bowed for grace

That unmerited undeserved favor had changed Moses. v. 11 NIV ‘*Moses sought the favor of the LORD*’

- What encouragement and example: pray for compassion by God’s character and covenant
Jer 18:7-8: *If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster ...*

There’s hope for our nation and the nations, judgment can be turned away if we turn to the Lord

- Grace for Israel and her enemies in the middle east, like God relented to Nineveh in Iraq
- There can be grace and peace to Ukraine and Russia through intercessions for salvation
- There can be grace to you if you repent, and seek the favor of the Lord for His namesake

Turn from your sin and trust Jesus as your only hope to turn away God’s wrath

Which takes me our 3rd final point to continue next time. Scripture’s solution for our idols

How does later scripture apply Ex 32 to us? 1 Cor 10:6 *Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.* ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; *as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”* ... ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. ¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

- This is a sin to flee not feed, take heed and seek escape from it by a faithful God’s grace
 - We’ll see more of Ex 32 next week but we need to see idolatry’s seriousness and solution
- 32:19** *And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.*
- Sounds like righteous anger, like the Lord Jesus threw tables over as He saw Israel’s sin

- Moses isn't rebuked for anger like other times, I think he reflects the Lord's broken heart
- In tears Jesus saw and spoke disaster for Israel, Jerusalem overthrown, broken in 70 AD
- It was as if God said like v. 7 '*Go down, my Son, to your people, bring them out of sin...*'
- He goes down like a 2nd Moses to let His people go, but their corruption is heart-breaking
- At Sinai God didn't consume sinners but there's consequences for sin, broken fellowship
- Israel broke the covenant and law they all heard in ch 20, now its written form is broken
- What happened to the stone tablets should happen to hardened rebels God could smash

But in grace He let a calf be crushed instead by a mediator. ²⁰ *He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.*

- Idolatry's power needs to be shattered and scattered, burned away, and beaten to a pulp
- This sin calls for a throw-down, its power needs to be broken so we know its bitter taste
- It's as if he's saying 'you wanna have your calf, drink it too. Taste and see it's not good'
- That wouldn't have digested, that would mess them up, then be eliminated in every way
- It's gross, but Phil 3:8 says false religion is manure compare to truly knowing the Lord

Boice: 'When Moses mixed the remains with water and made them drink it, it passed first into, and then out of, their bodies. This was a way of saying that the idol was refuse. It was as worthless as dung... [Ex 32] is our situation exactly... We worship political power or money, thinking that they bring [deliverance]... while we break the laws of God and bring ourselves under God's judgment—a wrath that is sure to fall—Jesus... says to God the Father, "I want to go down there and give my life for those stiff-necked, sinful, arrogant, obnoxious rebellious people, whom I nevertheless love." God the Father replies, "I accept that offer..." the cross...'¹¹

- We should be crushed for our sin, but Isa 53 says it was God's will to crush Jesus instead
- Jesus drank the bitter cup reserved for me, the Father's wrath deserved by my idolatries!
- He's the Chosen One who stood in the breach for us, intercedes for us 'Father, forgive...'
- He was left alone to suffer unrelenting consuming anger as He died, but then rose again
- What was broken at the foot of Mt. Sinai points our brokenness to the foot of the cross
- He gave the law we break but let His body be broken in our place to offer a friend grace
- If that doesn't motivate us to deal with sin and to pray to Him, I don't know what will!
- Repentant believers, let's come boldly to His throne of grace for mercy to us and nations

¹ This is the title Phil Ryken gives to this chapter in *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Crossway, 2005).

² Other examples of a “mountain top” where things went downhill after:

- Elijah’s ministry peaked at Mt. Carmel, but soon spiraled down into depression in a cave
- David, at the height of his rule and palace, looked down and chose adultery and murder
- The Lord Himself after the Mt. of Transfiguration went down to crooked perverse people
- After the apex of His baptism came temptation, and after the upper room came His darkest test

³ Eugene Carpenter points out the “molten calf” was, among other things, a symbol of strength, power, and fertility. Its sexual prowess was worshipped in Egypt and through the ancient Near East.’ – *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*, p. 301.

⁴ The NASB translates it as intimate “caressing” in Genesis 26:8 in a way only a man and wife should, and in another place it’s used illicitly “to *make sport of*...he came to lie with me and I screamed” in 39:14.

⁵ ‘It is important to see that the making of the calf, while from one perspective an act of gross apostasy and rebellion, was from another perspective an act driven by a need for reassurance and even by a misguided piety... Bovine deities are very common in both Egyptian and Canaanite religion. In the former, the Apis bull was the earthly manifestation of the god Ptah (one pair of Egyptian figurines, from the 26th dynasty, depicts a ruler kneeling before a bull), and the cow was the zoomorphic representation of the fertility goddess Hathor. In the latter, the senior Canaanite god El was regularly called a “bull.” Thus, the choice of a bull image is not surprising... [Israel] believed that when they merged YHWH and Baal [a god often in the form of a young bull] it was a permissible syncretism and not a preference of Baal over YHWH. Apostasy rarely presents itself as apostasy. In our day, similarly, the various ways that the church strays from simple fidelity to the gospel never advertises itself as a turning aside from the faith.’ – Duane Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2014), 618–621.

⁶ ‘In some instances images of bulls were pedestals upon which gods rested. In the light of this it has been suggested that the golden bull was the throne upon which the invisible YHWH sat... The iconic art of the ancient Near East shows that the calf or bull usually represented the pedestal of a god and not the deity itself. The latter was usually carved in human form... While the use of the golden bull as a pedestal is possible, the comments made by the Israelites suggest that the bull itself is an image of the ‘deity’. The people demand an idol and, as Oswalt remarks, ‘The reaction seems far too intense if the calf was not really an image of Yahweh...’ -- Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (InterVarsity Press, 2017), 2:622–623.

⁷ NIV “Put to death...greed, which is idolatry” (ESV “covetousness, which is idolatry”; note v. 6 says God’s wrath comes on sins like that still, much like Exodus 32). One version of the quote by Calvin says “man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols” – *Institute of the Christian Religion*, Battles translation (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), vol. 1, p. 108.

⁸ Genesis 2:8.

⁹ John Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus* (Evangelical Press, 2000), 2:277.

¹⁰ Duane A. Garrett, 626.

¹¹ Boice Montgomery Boice, *The Life of Moses* (Crossway, 2018), 187, 192.