

Idol Factories

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Well, we come now to really what could be described as one of the greatest tragedies in the Bible, in the whole of Scripture, in the whole story definitely that we've read so far from Genesis.

It's the greatest tragedy since Genesis chapter 3, the fall of man into sin. This is the great twist in the story of Exodus that we've been looking at over the last few months.

It's the big surprise. And it is the thing that, from here on out, is a stain on the relationship of the Israelites with God.

It's the episode of the golden calf. And it's a tragedy because of where it takes place in the story.

If you've been with us, you'll know that the Israelites have been rescued to be God's people through whom God is planning to carry out His purposes for the world.

[0 : 58] And He's brought them to this place and He said to them from Mount Sinai, He said, I am coming to dwell with you. And over the last few weeks, we've been seeing the instructions God has been giving to Moses for this tabernacle to build the place where God is going to dwell with His people and from where He's going to bless them.

And He's giving these instructions from the top of the mountain. But now, the camera turns to what's happening at the bottom, back in the camp. And what we discover is that while God is instructing His people on how He's going to come and dwell with them and bless them, they are working on their own way to get blessing and presence that God has promised, but not the way God is instructing.

They've got bored and they've waited too long. And so now they are finding their own way to bring the presence of God and to bring the blessing of God to themselves by making this idol.

Now we get to a story like this. They make this golden calf, right? Which they then start worshipping as God. This is the thing that's going to bring them the presence of God and the blessing of God.

And we think, how stupid. You know, we read that and we go, how stupid would they have had to be to think that this is better than what God is planning to give them after all that He's done for them.

[2 : 36] And after all that He's planning to do for them still, they still think they can do better themselves. That their way of getting blessing is better than God's way.

What idiots! And it's very easy for us to read this and go, I mean, obviously, we wouldn't do that. I mean, they're so stupid.

And yet, as we read this, and as we meditate on it, we're going to discover this morning that we're not that different. Because we do the same thing.

We have the same attitude every time we skip church. Or neglect our daily devotions. Or neglect growth group.

I mean, think about it. These things are the means that God has given us today to experience His presence in our lives.

[3 : 34] These means of grace. Church and His word and prayer and the community. And all these things is the means God has made for His presence to dwell in our lives.

And you need these things. Even when you don't think you do, you need these things that God has given. Ways for His presence to come into your life. And whenever you choose to do something else in place of those things, therefore, what you're doing is you're replacing what God wants to give you with something of your own making you think you need more.

And whatever that is, whatever you put in the place of meeting with God the way He has made for you to meet with Him every day and every week, whatever you put in place of that because you think you need it more or is more important that is your golden calf.

And we all do that. We all do that. See, the reason this story is in our Bibles is because it's talking about us. Great reformer John Calvin famously said, the human heart is a factory of idols. Our hearts can't help but make idols. Every day, manufacturing new things in our lives that we think we need more than God that push aside and replace His presence in our lives.

[5 : 05] And we all make idols for ourselves. And so when we come to Exodus 32 and we read about this, we are actually looking at a mirror, brothers and sisters. We're looking at a mirror that helps us to see the reality of our own idolatry.

But also as we read it, we see that there's a way that our idolatry can be overcome. And so let's look at what God has to say to us through Exodus 32 this morning.

And the first thing we discover is the nature of idolatry, this great sin, this thing that takes God's people away. And it's interesting how idolatry throughout the Old Testament is in some ways the chief sin of the Israelites, the people who should know better.

But it doesn't stop. In the New Testament, the amount of times we read, even just littered throughout the letters, the imperative, stay away from idols. Christians. Christians.

You know, it's an ever-present danger and sin for us as well. We need to realize that idolatry is not something that belongs in the Old Testament with ancient cultures. It's something that our hearts are prone to.

[6 : 16] And we see the nature of it. We learn the nature of this thing called idolatry. So let's see what happened. Have a look in your Bibles from verse 1. When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, come, make gods for us who will go before us.

Because this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we didn't know what has happened to him. Aaron replied to them, take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, your daughters, and bring them to me.

So all the people took off the gold rings that were on the ears and brought them to Aaron. Aaron, he took the gold from them, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it into the image of a calf.

Then he said, Israel, these are your gods who brought you up from the land of Egypt. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of it and made an announcement, there will be a festival to the Lord tomorrow.

Let's just pause there. Now this is the gold. We've just been reading, you know what the gold was meant to be used for, right? God allowed the Israelites to have all this gold when they exited Egypt so that it could be used to build a place that he is preparing to dwell with them, and yet now they're using it for their own God.

[7 : 36] How often we take the resources and the things that God has given us for his glory and for his work on earth, and we use it for ourselves. We use it to make our own gods, just like they were doing.

But you see what they're doing? They're trying to provide for themselves in this golden calf what God has already promised to give them, but they just need to wait for his presence, the presence of the divine in their lives, which is something we all actually want.

We know we're more than just bags of flesh. We know that there's a divine realm, and we want access to that. We were meant to, right from the beginning, Adam and Eve, to live in that overlap between heaven and earth, and yet our sin has cut us off from that, and we all want God in our lives.

Actually, whether you're a hardened atheist, or whatever you believe, you actually deeply desire the divine presence in your life and the blessing that comes from that. And that's what these people wanted.

The things that God promised to give them through his presence dwelling with them, and now they're using their gold to make it themselves. They're not willing to wait for God's way, so they devise their own.

[8 : 51] They make their own version of God. That's really what's going on here. They're going, you know, that God doesn't quite work for us.

And so we're going to do something, we're going to make our own, and we're going to carry on what, this project, but our own way. Very similar to the fall in Genesis 3, isn't it?

When Adam and Eve were like, yeah, okay, but what God has said to us doesn't quite work for us. We're going to take matters into our own hands. That's the heart of idolatry. Just making our own

versions of God that suit us.

And it's just as common today as it was back then when people devise a version of God in their life that suits them, that works for them.

And they pick and choose what from the Bible to listen to. And it's very popular to do that because you get the kind of God you want.

[9 : 55] Idolatry is very popular because you get the kind of God you want and your sin doesn't matter too much to idols. Did you notice that Israel were able to access this idol right away?

They just made it and there it was and they could go right up to it and they could access it and they could worship it and they could do what they wanted without all these tabernacle building instructions and the purity laws that needed to be put into place for them to meet the real God.

That was so much effort, so much work, so let's just make our own God and we can have access to Him and their sin didn't matter too much. In fact, this idol made no demands of them.

That's the great thing about idols is they make no demands. And that's why there is very prevalent in Christianity a form of Christian idolatry where you worship the Christian God but a version of Him that makes no demands of your life.

So many Christians do this. So many Christians are actually idolaters. Oh, I don't have to come to church. I'm saved by grace.

[11 : 08] I'm not saved by works. You know, and while that's true, yes, greatly true, we are saved by grace and not works, the subtext of people who have that attitude is I can do what I want and I can just rely on the Christian doctrine of grace to excuse me for actually living the way I want to do.

Christians do that all the time. That's not Christianity. That's idolatry dressed up as Christianity.

There's a big difference. Okay? It's very interesting how that's exactly what Aaron did.

Did you notice in the story, he dressed up the idolatry as to make it look like Yahweh worship?

Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, the name that he's revealed to them.

They were supposed to be worshiping Yahweh his way and yet they're now committing idolatry but Aaron kind of, okay, let me make the best thing of a bad situation and dress it up as Yahweh worship.

Have a look. Verse 5. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of it and made an announcement. There will be a festival to the Lord, Yahweh, tomorrow.

[12 : 18] Early the next morning, they arose, offered burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Okay? They're doing all the stuff that looked like the proper way of worshiping God but it was just idolatry dressed up like true worship of God.

Nothing's changed actually. There's so much idolatry dressed up as Christianity today. More than we like to believe.

More than we think in churches. You know, just because a person stands in a pulpit and preaches from the Bible does not mean that they are teaching you God's way. Very often, the preachers you see, especially on those TV channels or on YouTube, very often, they are doing what Aaron was doing here and they're giving people what they want to hear to enable them to make their own version of God in their minds.

they're picking and choosing what to read from Scripture when it actually is idolatry that they're promoting. The prosperity gospel, which is all over, everywhere, is actually idolatry.

It's the worship of money dressed up as Christianity because people use the Bible. Just because a person is standing and preaching the Bible does not mean that they're teaching God's way.

[13 : 37] Or churches embracing the LGBTQ movement in the name of love and tolerance. That is actually idolatry. It's the worship of sex and it's the worship of sexual freedom dressed up as Christianity.

It's all idolatry. It's all an attempt to get fulfillment and blessing our own way rather than God's way. And so you see, the first thing I want you to see is that idolatry is much more prevalent in our lives and our churches and our world than we realize.

We haven't moved much on from Exodus 32. But what we need to see next is that any replacing of God with idols leads to terrible consequences in our lives.

When we embrace idolatry, when we start to form a God of our own making in our minds, the consequences are dire. Let's look now from this chapter at the consequences of idolatry.

idolatry. And the major first consequence we see is that it releases in God's people the freedom to sin. It causes the release of sin in their lives that was previously held back.

[14 : 51] Now idolatry has opened it up and sin, it's like the breaking of a damn wall and it's just spouted forth in their life and their communities. Look at verse 6.

Early the next morning they arose, offered burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to play.

That's not talking about playing tennis by the way. That's a euphemism for a sexual orgy. But look at this, they're doing the religious things in verse 6 here.

They're doing their burnt offerings, they're doing their fellowship offerings, they're eating and drinking and then all hell breaks loose. It's just there's no restraint. Just all kinds of sin they've always wanted to do now comes out.

They do the religious thing and then they live how they want. It's not that different to so many forms of Christianity today. Look at the consequence.

[15 : 58] So they're doing all this disgusting stuff and then Moses arrives, verse 25, by the time he gets down the mountain, Moses saw that the people were out of control. Out of control.

For Aaron had let them get out of control. Their spiritual leader had given them, they had told them what they wanted to hear and their sin has just broken forth and they've got out of control.

So much so that they're an embarrassment to themselves. Even the other pagan nations look on and they go, gross. That's the result of idolatry.

Because the moment you start worshipping a God that doesn't mind sin, well it's open season for sin in your life. Freedom. I can live how I want. You hear that all the time today, don't you?

People love freedom. Being able to choose who I am and how I want to live. Well let's see what freedom does. Look at verse 7.

[17 : 00] Let's see, you want freedom to sin, to live your own way, to do things your own way? Well let's see what God thinks of that. Verse 7.

The Lord spoke to Moses, go down at once, for your people you brought up from the land of Egypt have corrupted them. themselves. They've corrupted themselves.

Literally, the Hebrew there is they've destroyed themselves. They've ruined themselves. That's what freedom does.

It ruins you. It destroys what God made you to be. did you know there's a very fine art brush that costs 15,000 rand.

And like the top artists get this brush specially made for them. And it's got the perfect size, bristles, the perfect softness that they are able to do their beautiful works of art with this art brush.

[18 : 12] But imagine taking this 15,000 rand art brush and using it to clean your car engine or varnish your gate. What's going to happen to it?

You're going to ruin it, right? That very delicate, very expensive art brush, if you use it just for anything, you're going to ruin it. like many of the things I often do in the garage with jeans, scissors, or tea towels, and I'm reminded that that's not what they're meant for, because you ruin them if you don't use them for what they're meant for.

You see, and the same happens when we think we're free to love how we want. The freedom to sin, freedom, ruins us because we're not living the lives we were made for.

And when that happens, and we are ruined, and we lose what we were made for by thinking we are living a free life, you know, you have these people who love the idea of sexual freedom and sexual liberation, but they are ruining their lives, and the consequences, you don't read about that, you don't see that in the media, but the consequences on the relationships and lives are terrible.

People are ruining their themselves left, right, and center in the name of freedom. That's what idolatry does. And when that happens, when humans decide to ruin themselves, look at verse 10.

[19 : 43] God says, now leave me alone so that my anger can burn against them and I can destroy them. That's what happens. You know, if we are not living the lives that God made us to live, he's got no reason to keep us around.

If we decide to ruin ourselves by worshipping God's own making, God has no responsibility to keep us around.

He has every right to destroy us. You see, idolatry seems to give you freedom, but it ruins you and ultimately it destroys people.

And that is why one of the worst things God can do for you, you know one of the worst things God can do to you is just let you worship your idols.

You know, if you really, really want to, God will just go, fine, have at it, live how you want. Romans 1, verse 24 to 25, that's exactly what God has done with the world.

[20 : 52] Therefore God delivered them over in their desires, of their hearts, to sexual impurity, God delivered them over. You want this? You want to live however you want? Fine, have at it.

So that their bodies were degraded, ruined, among themselves. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served what has been created instead of the creator who is praised forever.

Amen. You see how idolatry, worshipping and serve the created things rather than the creator, ruins us. It causes the gate of sin to open and then it's open season and we ruin ourselves, we destroy ourselves.

And the shocking thing is that we are all prone to that. Even God's own people, that's what we see in Exodus 32, God's own people are prone, just in a moment after everything that's happened, they slip into idolatry and boom, they're ruined.

And so God says, you know what, enough, I've had enough of them. You want to worship your own idols, you want to make your own idols, fine, I'm going to go, let's see how that works out for you.

[22 : 07] And that's what he's saying to you and me, if we decide to put other things in place of God in our lives that we think we need more than him, and crowd him out so we can chase after created things, God will eventually go, you know what, fine, have at it.

Let's see how that goes for you. But, there's hope in this story and that hope comes in the form of Moses, the man who stands in the breach for his people.

Israel is not destroyed, and the story doesn't end here, and the Bible doesn't end here, because Israel had an intercessor. Look at what happens from verse 11.

But Moses sought the favor of the Lord, his God. Lord, why does your anger burn against your people you brought up out of the land of Egypt with great power and a strong hand?

Why should the Egyptians say he brought them out with evil intent to kill them in the mountains and eliminate them from the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce anger and relent concerning this disaster planned for your people.

[23 : 25] Remember, your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, you swore to them by yourself and declared, I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky and give your offspring all this land of promise so that they will inherit it forever.

So, the Lord relented concerning the disaster he said he would bring on his people. God let a human, an intercessor, stand in the breach and he listened to him and he relented from the disaster, from destroying his people.

An intercessor, Moses, who didn't seek his own interests first. He could have. He could have.

Look at verse 10. I was amazed when I read this. God says to Moses, now leave me alone so that my anger can burn against them and I can destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation, saying to Moses.

So, Moses could have been spared. Moses could have been the start of a new great nation. You know what, if I had that offer and I was Moses, I would have gone, yeah, please, I'm sick of these people too, guys.

[24 : 42] Yeah, let's do that. But he didn't. He tied himself to the sinful, ruined people, Moses, when he could have got out of it.

And he identified with those sinners. And he ties his fate to theirs. You see what he said later in this amazing statement in verse 32, now if you would only forgive their sin, but if not, please erase me from the book you have written.

Moses ties his fate to his sinful people. When he could have just run a mile from them, he doesn't. He ties himself, he identifies with them, and God honors that and forgives them, not because they deserve it, but he forgives them for Moses' sake.

And they don't end up being ruined in their sin because of their intercessor. God forgives any sinner who is in Christ for the same reason, because Christ has done that for you.

Moses here is just a foreshadow. Moses in this chapter, in this Exodus, is just a dim foreshadow of what Jesus is going to come later and do for people.

[26 : 06] When Jesus died on the cross, you know what he was doing? He was standing in the breach between you, between us who are ruined in our sin, and God who has every right to destroy us.

And Jesus, when he went on that cross, he did exactly the same thing as Moses did for his people. He tied his fate to us. He identified with us. He put his own interests aside.

And he took on our fate as his own. And God honors and saves people from ruin who are bound, therefore, to Christ in faith.

I mean, consider what Jesus has done for us. He came to God and said, punish me instead of them. I know they're ruined, they're idolaters, they don't deserve it, but punish me instead. He left his father's throne above, so free, so infinite his grace, emptied himself of all but love and bled for Adam's helpless race.

[27 : 18] And that's why the only way you can escape ruin that your sin will lead you to and destroy you, the only way that you can escape ruin and be the person that God made you to be is to embrace Christ, your intercessor.

Have you done that yet? Because what Moses did for his people is what Christ does for us. But that's not all Moses did.

No, no, no, no, no, no. He also goes down and he stops them from doing it again. You see, he doesn't just come down the mountain and say, hey, good news guys, yeah, that was a really bad choice, but God has forgiven you.

No, he goes and ruthlessly destroys the idol. And then for all who still are unrepentant after their idolatry, well, let's see what happens from verse 26.

And Moses stood at the camp's entrance and said, whoever is for the Lord, come to me. Can you believe after all that, there were still people who didn't go, who still were stubbornly holding on to their idols.

[28 : 33] And all the Levites gathered around him. And he told them, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, every man fastened the sword to his side, go back and forth through the camp from entrance to entrance, and each of you kill his brother, his friend, and his neighbor.

Now, it seems drastic, I know. But you see, drastic action is necessary to save the Israelites from utter ruin that idolatry will bring them.

And do you know that Jesus Christ does the same in the lives of his people? He doesn't only save us and stand in the breach, he also comes down the mountain and he sanctifies us from our idols. so that we won't carry on in our idolatry. That's what Jesus does for us. Because we are all prone to idolatry.

You are an idolater. Your heart is an idol factory. This is what we would all be prone to. What we read in Exodus 32 is what we would all do.

[29 : 46] But that's why when Christ saves us, for those who trust in him, he doesn't only save us and forgive us, he comes into our lives and starts to change us and purge us of the idols that we used to worship.

And that is a lifelong process. He is still doing it. And sometimes that takes drastic action. When Christ will forcibly remove things from our lives that we worship in the place of God, whether that's money or security or health, to purge unrepentant idolatry.

But he does that even if it hurts, he does that to save us from permanent ruin. And so maybe even this morning as I close, he is calling you through this passage to consider your own life and to go back and forth and to find ways that you still worship idols, parts of your life where God is sidelined so you can pursue what you want.

and maybe he is calling you to get rid of that remaining idolatry, the transforming power of his Holy Spirit and to realize that in his presence in your life, which has found his way, not yours, you can find everything you ever wanted and you don't need idols.

Let's pray. O Lord, we hear you. Your word is hard.

[31 : 27] It pierces us. But we hear you. We hear what you're saying to us. And we are your people and we repent and we pray that you will change us.

we pray, Lord Jesus, by your sanctifying power that you would come into our lives again and purge us of our idols that risk ruining us.

Thank you for warning us against them. And Lord, help us to worship you and you alone. In Jesus' name. Amen.