

## Becoming Like What We Worship

Loss of Meaning and the Problem of Idolatry—part 4

March 19, 2023

### DAY 1: The golden calf—an expose of human nature

1. The eventual consequences for idolatry are consequences we never see coming.

*Deut. 28:64-65 “Among those nations you shall find no rest, and there will be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and languishing of soul.”*

#### The golden calf (Exodus 32)

*Exodus 32:1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”*

2. This is a stunning, jaw-dropping, head-scratching turn around. You think, “how could they turn away from God after these miraculous events THEY WITNESSED???” And therein lies our lessons about human nature.

3. It wasn’t that long ago that they saw the ten plagues that brought Egypt to its knees. They heard the grand declaration that they were free from slavery. God provided His people everything they needed through the Egyptian people who aided them in leaving! They stood terrified at the Red Sea when Pharaoh changed his mind and was pursuing them with his army. They watched in utter disbelief as the Red Sea parted and the people passed by on dry ground. They stood in awe when the Egyptian army pursued them down into the Red Sea seabed, which suddenly became mud again, and the waves closed over them, drowning every soldier. The Hebrews witnessed all of that!

*“...so long in coming down from the mountain...”*

4. What do we learn about human nature from the setting of this story?

a. Impatient.

Why? We hate the unknown and uncertainty.

b. Insecure.

Things are not “under control.” “We must take matters into our own hands; we can’t just sit here and do nothing.”

c. Immediate needs, now!

They were not willing to delay gratification, certainty, or a sense of control.

*“Come, make us gods who will go before us.”*

d. “We have a better idea.”

5. We want something we can see, we can control, something to which I can be certain.

6. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

## DAY 2: Misplaced hope and trust

*Exodus 32:2 Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.*

1. The Hebrew people had been slaves! They had nothing of value until the Egyptian people gave them what they wanted if they would just leave! Aaron and the people were ready to put their just acquired gold, their most expensive valuables on the line. They took the gold earrings that their wives, sons, and daughters were wearing. This was no trifling commitment. People put in all the treasure they had. Why?

*Exodus 32:4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."*

2. To modern minds, this looks ridiculous. It's because a golden calf looks ridiculous to us. But think about what the people did and why they did it. They put their money where their mouth was.

3. The people were buying two things: **certainty** and **hope**, without having to depend on God.

4. This calf took away the uncertainty of Moses' return and gave them renewed hope that "someone" or "something" or some god would move them ahead.

5. We do the same things with our money and treasure. We are looking for some sense of control and certainty, and we are people with hopes for a satisfying future.

We settle for foolish hope over raw "uncertainty."

*Exodus 32:4 Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."*

6. Here is another perversity in human nature seen in the response of the people.

7. They gave credit to the ones (gods) **they wanted to believe** had delivered them **rather** than the One who actually delivered them.

8. Why? We are determined to place our hopes under something we can do or manufacture. If a god can be manipulated that makes that god quite a catch for people. That god is obligated to give you the life you want, to make sure you get what you want and need. It feels so good to have the feeling of control of life and your life.

*<sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." <sup>6</sup> So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.*

9. Here is another perversity of our nature. They **claimed** to be God's people while now living as idolaters! Why? In the hopes of **justifying** their sin and **satisfying** their sense of morality.

10. What strikes you from today's devotional?

### DAY 3: “Stiff-necked”

*Deuteronomy 9:6 Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for **you are a stiff-necked people.***

1. God’s people were “stiff-necked” people. The image was associated with the stiff neck of a calf made of gold.

They became identified with the idol they worshiped.

*Deut. 9:12 Then the Lord told me, “Go down from here at once, because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have turned away quickly from what I commanded them and have made an idol for themselves.”*

*Deut. 9:24 You have been **rebellious** against the LORD **ever since I have known you.***

The golden calf came to be recognized as the paradigm of idolatry.

2. The people were compared to the calf who were running wild (Ex. 32:25), needed to be gathered together again (Ex. 32:26), so that Moses could lead them where they needed to go (Ex. 32:34).

*Hosea 4:16 Since Israel is **stubborn** like **a stubborn heifer**, can the Lord now pasture them like a lamb in a large field?”*

3. The implied answer is no. The punishment for being a rebellious calf is life without a shepherd. Their foolish belief was that they did not need the divine shepherd. Instead, they were trusting what they were sure was a more secure route to getting what they wanted and believed they needed.

### The Radiant Face of Moses

*Exodus 34:29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that **his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.**  
<sup>30</sup> *When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.**

4. There is a stunning contrast between what happens when we idol worship or God worship. The glowing countenance of Moses reflects the glory of God and the effect on us when God is our real worship. We glow (satisfaction, joy, contentment, peace, etc.). See 2 Cor. 3:18.

*Psalm 34:5 They looked on Him and were radiant.*

5. In contrast whatever idol we are worshipping turns us like the idol: empty, despondent, discouraged, restless, anxious, lifeless, etc.

6. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

## DAY 4: Idolatry in Jeremiah, and its effects

Jeremiah 2:5 ... This is what the LORD says: “What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed **worthless idols** and **became worthless themselves**.

<sup>6</sup> They did not ask, ‘Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and ravines, a land of drought and utter darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?’

Jeremiah 2:11 Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have **exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols**. <sup>12</sup> Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror,” declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 2:13 “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

- a. Sin #1: forsaken God as their spring of living water (Satisfaction, joy, peace, etc.)
- b. Sin #2: manufactured gods of their own choosing and hands that didn’t work

Jeremiah 2:20 “Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said, ‘I will not serve you!’ Indeed, on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a **prostitute**. <sup>21</sup> I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into **a corrupt, wild vine**? <sup>22</sup> Although you wash yourself with soap and use an abundance of cleansing powder, the stain of your guilt is still before me,” declares the Sovereign LORD.

1. Idolatry is more than misplaced trust. It is as heinous as a husband going to be with a prostitute instead of his wife. It turns us from a “choice vine of sound and reliable stock” to a “corrupt, wild vine.”

Jeremiah 5:3 LORD, do not your eyes look for truth? You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but **they refused correction**. They made **their faces harder than stone** and **refused to repent**. <sup>4</sup> I thought, “These are only the poor; they are foolish, for **they do not know the way of the LORD**, the requirements of their God.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore a lion from the forest will attack them, a wolf from the desert will ravage them, a leopard will lie in wait near their towns to tear to pieces any who venture out, for their rebellion is great and their backslidings many.

Psalms 81:11 “But my people **would not listen to me**; Israel would not submit to me. <sup>12</sup> **So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices**. <sup>13</sup> “If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways, <sup>14</sup> how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes!

2. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

## DAY 5: The Lord's long-suffering mercy and love

1. You may think, "Wow, this study is a real downer!"
2. In reality, it is a stunning expose of what is going on in our hearts. It explains why we are so stubborn, hard-headed, rebellious, and conflicted.

3. But, again and again, over and over again, God will hear us, often when we have hit bottom. When our idols finally fail us, and they will, they leave us feeling worthless and lifeless.

4. It is there that we discover the wonder of God's character!

*Jeremiah 31:18 "I have surely heard Ephraim's moaning: 'You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the LORD my God.*

4. God hears our "moaning." Moaning has two elements to it.
  - a. It is the "voice" of being demoralized, feeling like a failure, lifeless, and empty.
  - b. It is also the "voice" of hunger to be different, and to walk with God, afresh.

*Jeremiah 31:19 After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.*

5. What elements put us back on the right track with God?

6. After we have failed God, we often feel like spiritual "losers." We imagine God may take us back, but does so reluctantly, grudgingly, like a parent of a teen that has been hoodwinked hundreds of time by the rebellious teenager.

*Jeremiah 31:20 Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore, my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him," declares the LORD.*

7. Yet we find that God is nothing like we imagine. Underline the words of tender affection, even for a rebellious "son."

8. What strikes you from today's devotional?