

Date : 4 June 2023

Theme : Understanding the journey of faith in Exodus

Topic : The sin God hates most

Passage : Exodus 32

Key Verse : *“They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’” (Exodus 32:8)*

Introduction

The ‘golden calf’ in *Exodus* is a valuable lesson on the blatant disobedience disguised under the cloak of celebrating God.

This is the third month after the Israelites left Egypt (*Exodus 19:1*). They camped in front of Mt Sinai. They had experienced the deliverance of the Lord with signs and wonders. God spoke to Moses to tell them: *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession...”*, and the people agreed (*Exodus 19:3-8*). And *Exodus 24:3-11* confirms their agreement to the covenant [for Moses wrote down everything the Lord had said (*vs4*) and read to them] - *“We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.” (vs7).*

Then the Lord called Moses to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone with the law and commandments. Moses was up in the mountain for forty days and forty nights and was on the way down when the people grew impatient and gathered around Aaron demanding: *“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.” (Exodus 32:1).* They clearly were very demanding in their behaviour. They also despised their leader by the way they made reference to Moses.

The making of the golden calf is a direct violation of the 2nd Commandment (*Exodus 20*) which clearly forbids bowing, making, worshipping idols.

- It’s idolatry – Idolatry is the reverence given to something or someone other than God, as though it were God.

- Why did the Israelites get corrupted so soon after they personally witnessed God’s manifested presence and just 40 days earlier had declared their acceptance of God’s terms of their covenant making?

- What kind of consequences can one expect after we deliberately violate the terms of the covenant?

- What is idolatry in the context of our lives?

1. What lessons can we learn on how the Israelites fell into this great sin

a) What was the problem? Surely they have seen God in action from:

- The Miracles and His manifested presence
 - The plagues upon Egypt (*Exodus 7:4-5*)
 - The pillar of cloud and fire (*Exodus 13:21*)
 - Crossing the Red Sea experience (*Exodus 14:13-31*)
They saw *“the mighty hand of the LORD...” (Exodus 14:31)*

- Provision of food and water (*Exodus 16 & 17*)
- Protection – the Amalekites were defeated (*Exodus 16 & 17*)
- The manifested presence of God at Mt Sinai (*Exodus 32*)
“... the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear.” (Exodus 20:18).

They saw God in a way few have seen. Yet even recent encounters with God seems to have no effect on their behaviour

b) Why then did they err?

- They took their covenant with God lightly as:
 - Their ‘worldview’ of God was still based on their old cultural God – The Bull god of the Egyptians. Like many Christians today who had not taken the trouble to identify the God of the Bible, they have their own idea of God.
 - Aaron failed to provide leadership. He played along with them and complied with the peoples’ wishes.

c) Why is idolatry a great sin?

Moses twice acknowledged how great this sin is (*Exodus 32:21,30-31*)

- In making and worshipping the golden calf, the Israelites broke the 2nd Commandment (*Exodus 20:1-5; 20:23; 23:13*)
- It is an insult to God: The people made the offerings through Aaron and the 4 priests – a religious act to be made to God only and to no other.
- God said: *“They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it...” (Exodus 32:8)*
- When they said: *‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’” (Exodus 32:8)*, they also violate the 1st Commandment (*“You shall have no other gods before me”*). They had agreed to keep the Ten Commandments. They were practising a form of idolatry called syncretism, attributing glory to false gods instead of the True God.
- What they had done was simply giving their own gods a ‘Christian’ name.

d) How the sin of idolatry was committed

In their worship of the golden calf, they:

- Engage in revelry, partying and merrymaking by drinking, dancing, singing nosily - they went wild, while still at the holy ground
- Out of control (*vs 25*). Moses showed up and they still continued
- They ‘worshipped’ and gave offerings (*Exodus 32:5*) to the god they made (*Exodus 32:6-7*)

2. Why is this a great sin?

And God’s righteous anger was upon them: *“I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them...” (Exodus 32:9-10)*

a) The consequences are great. Idolatry always brings the curse of God.

(1) God disowns covenant breakers

- The Lord God commands Moses to go down to **“your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt.”** Previously, God had repeatedly referred to Israel as **“my people”** (*Exodus 3:7,10; 5:1; 6:7; 7:4, 16; 8:1, 8,20-23, 9:1,13,17; 10:3; 12:31; 19:5-6; 22:25*) whom **“I brought out of the land of Egypt”** (*3:17; 6:6-7; 18:1,12; 20:2; 29:46*).

(2) It invites destruction

- **“Now let me alone, so that . . . I may consume them”** (*Exodus 32:10*).
There was an immediate execution of those who ignored warnings to ‘cool God’s anger’ - **“... that day about three thousand of the people died.”** (*Exodus 32:28*)
They were fools to ignore Moses’ warnings.

(3) Names will be blotted out – this is an eternal consequence

- **“Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.”** (*Exodus 32:33*)

(4) God struck them with a plague

- **“And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.”** (*Exodus 32:35*)

3. How to avoid the great sin of idolatry

Idolatry is a major obstacle in our walk of faith. We need to recognise what is idolatry in order to avoid falling into this sin

a) How to deal with idolatry which can cause us to fall?

- First, recognise the various forms of idolatry among us today

Idol worship

- Idolatry in the form of worship of a cult image or someone (as an ‘idol’) as though it were God
eg Beetle-mania - the fanaticism surrounding the English rock band (the Beatles) in the 1960’s; and any form of fanaticism surrounding the ‘K-Pop’ and American Idol.

Drug abuse

- This is the worship at the altar of self-indulgence through drugs, and includes the over reliance of drugs in medication

Obsession with Pornography

- It’s a form of sexual immorality for which pornography is the most common one from surveys conducted
[Joanna Koh, CEO of Focus on the Family, revealed at a Summit organised by Cru Singapore that 70% of church members and attendees have engaged in pornography, and half of these happened in the past year. (Ref: “Has porn infiltrated the Singapore Church?”; Eunice Sng, CRU; current posting]
- Pornography is visual adultery
 - **“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry”** (*Colossians 3:5*)

Love of Money

- The root of all evil (*1 Timothy 6:10*).

- You cannot serve both God and mammon (**Matthew 6:24**)

Addiction to gambling, smoking, drinking and even hobbies

- [*National Addiction Management Service reported that gambling addiction is on the rise in Singapore... with addicts seeking help doubling since 2010... Singapore is the second biggest gambling nation in the world, after Australia*] (Ref: *The Cabin, Singapore; May 2023*)
- In cases where our hobbies take first priority... taking us away from keeping the sabbath and even displacing God from our life

Controlled by your smartphone and tablets to the exclusion of others

- Using and texting on your smartphone while worshipping God... the use of such devices that displaces our priority for God
- Ignoring the needs of others as you're too engrossed in your personal device

Relegating God-given blessings to glorify others or oneself

- Where God given resources are used for ungodly purposes
- They forgot the grace of God and failed to use the gifts of God for His glory (**Exodus 32:3-4**). The gold came from God's victory for them - it pictured God's grace and faithfulness – and they used it to create an idol. They removed the rings that reminded them of the grace of God to make the golden calf (**Exodus 32:20-22**).

Yielding to various forms of attractions at the altar of materialism

- Buying items to build up our ego, going for the latest gadgets for self-gratification, collecting items in covetousness
- indulging in our materialistic desires keeps our focus on ourselves and not on God.

c) What it takes for idolatry to be avoided

- Walk well in your covenant relationship with God, keeping His commands and obeying His words
- Implement the habit of spiritual discipline
 - Pray and read the Bible daily
 - Keep the sabbath holy
 - Do not neglect to meet up at your cell meeting (**Hebrews 10:24**)
- Be accountable to your mentor, wife/husband.

Application

1. Identify idolatry in your sphere that you may be vulnerable to, and how you do you think you can avoid.

2. Can you identify any 'golden calf' in your heart?

Will you take action to cast it away? Ezekiel speaks against setting up idols in the heart: "... **these men have set up idols in their hearts... This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!**" (**Ezekiel 14:3,6**)

3. What are some spiritual disciplines you have adopted to keep away from idols?