

## Idol Temptation

Exodus 32:1-35

### Introduction

**Hard to Wait:** One of the hardest things to do is teach children to wait patiently (e.g., buy crap with \$5 or save and buy something nice, e.g., Nintendo Switch). Children are just little humans, their perspectives are more limited, and their worlds are smaller, but they do in micro what we adults do in macro.

**Spiritual Waiting:** The people of Israel are camped at the base of the holy mountain. God has led them out of slavery, heard God's voice, and twice pledged themselves to obey him.<sup>1</sup> But at this moment, Moses has been gone for 40 days, and they are impatient. They aren't hearing the voice of God right now, they aren't seeing the miracles of God right now, they're sitting silent and alone in the desert, and they panic.

- **The disappointments and delays of God will either push you to trust or away to idolatry.**

**Silence of God:** I'm not talking about trivial things, I'm talking about deep disappointments: infertility, miscarriage, abuse, addiction, diagnosis, depression, etc.

- It's enough to drive a man crazy / Or break a man's faith / It's enough to make him wonder / If he's ever been sane / When he's bleeding for comfort / From thy staff and thy rod / And the heavens' only answer / Is the silence of God / And if a man has got to listen / To the voices of the mob / Who are reeling in the throes / Of all the happiness they've got / When they tell you all their troubles / Have been nailed up to that cross / What about the times when even followers get lost? / Cause we all get lost sometimes
- God is not absent, but there are moments when he *feels* absent. God is not distant, but sometimes he *feels* far away. God is not *slow* concerning his promises, but his patience can feel like abandonment.<sup>2</sup>

**Crossroads:** The people are at a crossroads. Will their waiting turn into wandering? Will their faith turn into forgetfulness? And the **temptation** is the same for us... will we wait with trust in God or impatiently build idols that cannot save us?

### 1. Impatient Idolatry (vv. 1-6)

<sup>1</sup> 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." <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> And he received the gold

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ex 14:30-31, 19:8, 19:19, 24:7

<sup>2</sup> 2 Pet 3:9

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!"<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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.

**Delay:** The scene shifts from this sublime, personal conversation between YHWH and Moses to the people on the ground. "Sinai, we have a problem." Moses delayed... we do not know what has become of him." Moses has been gone *too long*. It's not that he hasn't come back (he will) or that they shouldn't expect him to come back (they should), it's that he's not back on their schedule.

- Sometimes, the delays are worse than the rejections (I just want to know one way or another), e.g., a big test.

**Disappointment:** "When God's timing seems questionable, his lack of intervention seems hurtful, and his promises doubtful, I get afraid. I get confused. And left alone with those feelings, I can't help but feel disappointed that God isn't doing what I assume a good God should do" (Terkeurst).

- Disappointment is usually the fruit of unmet **expectations**, when our expectations don't align with real-time experience.
  - Most people, even most Christians, operate with a pervasive (though false) expectation that if I'm a "good" person, then God will give me good things. Bad people get bad things, etc. We give prosperity gospel preachers with private jets a hard time because their pyramid scheme is too obvious, but many of us operate under similar expectations. Ours might be more subtle and less audacious (less billionaire, more hundred-thousandaire). E.g., I've been good, why am I depressed, kids rebellious, relationship falling apart, health declining, etc. We expect God to act reasonably (according to our definition of reasonable and according to our assessment of who is being reasonable).

This is not a theoretical conversation. **At some point, God will disappoint you.** It *has* to happen. You don't want God to meet all your expectations. If God never disappoints you, then you're God (and that's a much scarier thought).

- Oprah famously remarked that she couldn't believe the God of the Bible because it says that God is jealous.

Disappointment will reveal what you worship. It'll either send you running to God in faith or fleeing to idols for false comfort. Disappointment doesn't have to lead to disobedience.

- Live in God's presence even when you don't see it. "Don't doubt in the dark what you saw in the light."
- Israel often wants a visible thing to worship or leader to follow (e.g., king like the nations, Saul). The waiting is not simply a test of time but a test of trust. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

**Polytheism or Idolatry?:** We can tell this is ultimately about idolatry and not worshipping another god (make us gods).

- The form of Elohim can mean the Triune God (singular) or many false gods (plural). The verb here is plural.
- The same term is used to clearly describe idols throughout the Hebrew Bible. Cf. **other gods of wood and stone** (Deut 28:36).
- Clearly “made” in this passage (an idol).
- Aaron tries to use the calf as part of a worship service to YHWH.
- The term “golden” (מִסְכָּה) literally means a molten or graven image (i.e., an idol).

**Syncretism:** They think they belong to God, but they still are loyal to their idols.

- Syncretism is more deadly than rebellion (e.g., **mixing poison with a sweet drink, it masks its taste**).
- They figure because they can do what they want because they’ve made it this far: **<sup>1</sup> For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. <sup>6</sup> Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day (1 Cor 10:1-8).**
- **“This way, we can still retain the name Christian, keep going to church, keep singing our favorite worship songs. We may even convince ourselves that God doesn’t mind” (Sach).**

**The Problems with Idols:** The problems with idols are manifold

- **(1) Impoverish:** <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.
- Idols will rob you. **God gives; idols take.**
  - All of this gold was meant to be used to worship and glorify god in the Tabernacle. Now it’s being used for a lifeless tchotchke. This idol is anti-tabernacle.
- They will spend all of this gold and get nothing in return. Your idols will take and take only to leave you poor and empty (e.g., **career, car, toxic relationships, etc.**).
- Idols will impoverish your behavior too. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play (v. 6). Morals are loosened (cf. 1 Cor 10:7-8).
  - **“The attraction of a design-your-own God is design-your-own ethics” (Sach).** Do what you want. God looks conspicuously like me, approves of my behaviors, and understands my shortcomings
- **(2) Deceive:** <sup>4</sup> And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.

- The great lie of the idol is that it has some sort of power. It doesn't. It is **self-made**. When you worship something other than God, it leads to despair, loneliness, and anxiety because the idol cannot give you what you want it to give.
- If you could save yourself, then you'd have already done it. The idol is just a lie you tell yourself to feel better.
- An idol is an invention, a creation of human beings, an invention of the human imagination.
- They have reshaped and reconceptualized YHWH as a calf.

**Why do we make idols?** Idols are under our control. They are manageable, approachable, and palatable. It's a lot less scary to disobey a knobby-kneed, shiny calf than a God of thunder and fire.

- There is a long Christian tradition of not portraying images of God (2CV)<sup>3</sup>. Whether or not we should portray Jesus in art is beyond the scope of this conversation (if you want to discuss religious iconography afterward, I'd love to). **Its permissibility says nothing of its danger**. Even a physical form limits God (God is everywhere all the time; not like a gas stretched but in all places equally at all times).
- We live in a Photoshop world. Instagram-crafted pics. It's not new (FDR wheelchair).
- The danger is we **portray him the way we want him to be rather than the way he is** (e.g., White Jesus, Black Jesus, South Asian, East Asian, etc.).
- Talladega Nights: "Dear baby eight pound, six ounce, baby Jesus in your golden fleece diapers." "He grew up, he had a beard." **"I like to picture Jesus** in a Tuxedo T-shirt with giant eagle wings singing lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd with an angel band."
- E.g., Quest for the Historical Jesus made him look suspiciously like a nineteenth-century, white, European liberal academic. **When we create a Jesus to worship, we always seem to create a Jesus that looks suspiciously like us!**

In some ways, we break this commandment whenever we define God in our heart as we want Him to be rather than believing what He reveals Himself to be.

- The easiest slavery to free Israel from was Egypt, the hardest is sin. They have been liberated from Pharaoh but not from their idolatry.

**Idols Worshippers:** You shall not bow down to them or serve them (Ex 20:5). Anytime we worship God as we want him to be, not as he is, misrepresent him, or put something in his place, we commit idolatry.

- There is no option *not* to worship. We must worship rightly. **We are all worshippers**. America's unofficial religion is having their annual worship service right now, complete with rules, liturgy, singing, prescribed clothing, etc. Don't give your love, adoration, and allegiance to something that belongs to God.
  - If the *first* commandment tells us not to worship anyone or anything **other** than God, the *second* tells us not to worship anything **less** than God (Ex 20:3-6)
- You will either worship the divine or you will worship the mundane. **"A man may have enough of the world to sink him but he can never have enough to satisfy him"** (Thomas Brooks).
  - Our idols end up destroying us (which is why God must destroy them first).

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<sup>3</sup> Ex 20:4-6

What are the idols in your life? In what ways have you crafted God into an image you prefer rather than worship him according to how he has revealed himself? What are you giving your love, adoration, and allegiance to in the place of God?

## 2. Clarifying Conversation (vv. 7-14)

<sup>7</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup> They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" <sup>9</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> 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? <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.'" <sup>14</sup> And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

**Conversation:** God explains the problem to Moses. 'Cause God can see what Moses can't see. God reminds Moses that they're acting sinful like him, not holy like God (your people, whom you brought up, cf. "do you know what your son did?").

**Quick Self-Corruption:** They have corrupted themselves. This is not God's problem (don't blame God for your sin).

- They blame God for his delay, but the reality is they have turned aside quickly. They act like Moses has been gone a long time (it hasn't been that long). **God is not slow, we're impatient.** "Are we there yet?" (we just pulled out of the driveway).
- "I Just Can't Wait to Be King." We want the blessing even though we're not ready and can't take it. God's timing is perfect.

**Recalcitrant:** They are stiff-necked. Hard-headed, hard-hearted, and stubborn (think a donkey, pulling at the reins, kicking back lit. recalcitrant). Thankfully God can use a donkey (cf. Balaam).

- They absolutely deserve to be punished as they made a covenant with God to abide by his rules and stipulations and a violation includes a promise by God to punish.
- We think we shouldn't get punished, so we throw God away on a deal we won't even keep ourselves (terms of service).
  - **God has to be mad at our sin or he wouldn't be righteous, holy, and just.** If God ignored our sin, he wouldn't be a good God. Sin must be destroyed.

- This isn't just an OT thing (Jesus gets mad at sin too). God never changes. The same God of the OT is the same God of the NT, revealed more fully by Jesus.

**Change of Mind?:** This interesting conversation occurs (multiple times in Scripture). Does prayer change God's mind?

- The Bible clearly explains that God is unchanging in His nature, character, and promises (immutable). His essence, character, and will remain constant over time. Unlike humans, who can change their minds, feelings, and actions, God remains faithful, reliable, and unchanging in His perfect attributes. If he changed, he wouldn't be God. He'd be as fickle as we are.
  - "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you" (Mal 3:6).
  - "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change"
  - "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num 23:19).
  - "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).
- So what do we do with passages like this (and others) that appear to show God changing his mind (hold both ends of the anchor).
  - This actually proves to be a **test** for Moses. Moses starts off begging for compassion but ends in judgment. God ends up judging correctly but extending grace. The holiness of God requires the Bible to use **anthropomorphic language** to explain the inscrutable God to finite humanity.
  - 19th century Princeton theologian A.A. Hodge said it this way: "Does God know the day you'll die? Yes. Has he appointed that day? Yes. Can you do anything to change that day? No. Then why do you eat? To live. What happens if you don't eat? You die. Then if you don't eat, and die, then would that be the day that God had appointed for you to die?... Quit asking stupid questions and just eat. Eating is the means God has appointed for living." Quit asking stupid questions and just pray. The Bible doesn't give us answers to all questions. In fact, it doesn't just give us answers but the questions we should ask. Maybe you're not asking the right question.

**Reminding God:** So Moses implores, reminding him of his promises and character. God doesn't need to be reminded. You get the sense that God isn't the one needing the reminding, Moses is.

- He reminds God that he saved these people, why would he destroy his own **possession**? Why would he save them only to destroy them?
- He reminds God of his own **promise** to make them a great nation. The very thing Moses uses to "change" God's mind is God's own promise (again more for Moses than God).

**Mercy:** <sup>14</sup> And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.



- Grace, forgiveness, mercy. God will get his justice, but he will also show mercy (this is the beauty of the gospel). Everyone else can either have justice or mercy, but only God gets both.
- Moses can't save these people, but Jesus can (the true and better Moses). **It is on the cross that mercy and justice meet**, where sin was paid and grace extended by Jesus.

### 3. Purifying Punishment (vv. 15-35)

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. <sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." <sup>18</sup> But he said, "It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear." <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" <sup>22</sup> And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. <sup>23</sup> For they said to me, '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.' <sup>24</sup> So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." <sup>25</sup> And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), <sup>26</sup> then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. <sup>27</sup> And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" <sup>28</sup> And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. <sup>29</sup> And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day." <sup>30</sup> The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." <sup>31</sup> So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. <sup>32</sup> But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." <sup>33</sup> But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. <sup>34</sup> But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." <sup>35</sup> Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

**Famous Tablets:** Famous tablets make their first appearance (different than we envision, two-sided-tablet copier; on the front and on the back). God wrote these, they are not inventions

of man. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

**With His Own Eyes:** As he comes down the mountain, **Joshua** (who's positioned halfway up the path) thinks he hears war shouts (a military man jumps to military conclusions). It's not the sound of might (victory) or weakness (defeat) but some indiscriminate roar (a raucous party). Then **Moses** sees with his own eyes what God had described. And now *his* anger burns hot like God's did (where is the sweet Moses from the mountain?).

- Moses wanted mercy until he saw what God saw. Hearing and seeing and not the same (e.g., Holocaust Museum).
- In righteous anger, he hurls the tablets, and they shatter. The shattered tablets were nothing compared to the shattered covenant (e.g., Jesus flipping tables).
- In my favorite Biblical punishment, he makes them drink the gold (like dad cigarettes).
  - A poignant picture of the poison of idolatry: Water from the rock that God provided, filled with the poison of the idol. What will nourish you (God's provision), will destroy you when it is compromised by idolatry.

**Aaron's Excuses:** Moses has a frustrating conversation with Aaron. Aaron was supposed to lead but instead, he **enabled** sin. Aaron (like Adam) wants to **blame** the people ("I couldn't stop them"). "They're evil, not me." "The gold just jumped into the fire, and a calf popped out." 😊

- Two things can be true at once. The people can be wicked, and their leadership can be corrupt (Aaron had let them break loose).<sup>4</sup>

**Idol Choice:** Now comes the opportunity for repentance. **Forgiveness is free, but it is not automatic.** The people are called to repent. The details are sparse, but it's clear that *not* everyone is killed (so some repented).

- Some are atoned for (the repentant?), and some are destroyed (the unrepentant?).
- Sin must be punished. In 1 Cor 10 the admonition isn't so much about grace as it is a warning about judgment. "You cannot walk safely down the tightrope of sin" (Sach).
- "If you reject Jesus, then his blood won't help you any more than the blood of Moses could help the Israelites" (Sach).

**Moses the Mediator:** The Moses paradox occurs again as he attempts to atone for the sin of the people as their mediator. Basically saying if you don't forgive them, then destroy me too (*contra* God's statement of a new nation through Moses, v. 10). Moses is a great mediator but he is still imperfect. He can't die for the sins of Israel because he himself is a sinner.

- All the instructions about the Tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices point forward to a spotless lamb that would bear sin. The shortcomings of Moses point to the fulfillment of Christ, our perfect mediator.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> What does the derision of their enemies mean? They have become a laughingstock. Even non-Christians know you should act like a Christian. Ride or die with YHWH.

<sup>5</sup> For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself (Heb 3:3).



## Conclusion

- In moments of disappointment, waiting, discouragement, and fear, you will be tempted to turn to idols for comfort, security, and identity. But these idols will only destroy you.
- What would it look like, rather than crafting idols in our impatient hearts, if we waited with patient hope for God to lead us on?
- We can't control our disappointment, but we can control our response to it.
- Faith can actually grow better in the valley (e.g., like food grows in the valley, Rwanda).
- In moments of suffering, we can join Jesus in his suffering and trust the plan of God.  
"There is no greater comfort to a Christian than to be made like Christ by patiently suffering." (Book of Common Prayer, "Visitation for the Sick," *adapted*).
  - There's a statue of Jesus / On a monastery knoll / In the hills of Kentucky / All quiet and cold / He's kneeling in the garden / As silent as a stone / All his friends are sleeping / And He's weeping all alone / And the man of all sorrows / He never forgot / What sorrow is carried / By the hearts that he bought / So when the questions dissolve / Into the silence of God / The aching may remain / But the breaking does not / In the holy, lonesome echo / Of the silence of God.
- Even if \_\_\_\_\_, will I trust and obey?