Idolatry and Desires

Good morning! My name is Matt Chesney and I am the director of youth and outreach here at Eagle Ridge and it is my pleasure to be speaking with you today. We are continuing our journey through the Bible and have arrived at a very well known story – and yet, still confusing when you read through it slowly and try to understand what and why these things are happening. So before we begin I need to remind you (or perhaps explain for the first time) that the Old Testament was not written to be a history textbook (or a science textbook for that matter). The Hebrew people used the process of oral tradition to pass down their history from generation to generation – and the Bible is not necessarily those oral traditions in text form. It was written to communicate theological truth. To reveal God, to teach about God, to teach lessons and to help people draw closer to God and understand Him better. Because of that the stories are not written to be 100% complete – there are many details missing – and that was okay because the people already knew the details of the story from their oral tradition. The Bible simply highlighted parts of that story and emphasized certain things to draw attention to them and their importance. Every “story” in the Old Testament was written to communicate theological truth… not to just tell a story.

A Bible scholar, by the name of Dr. Michael Heiser, that I respect and often use as one of my sources to learn more about the Ancient Near East culture, religions, and insights into the original language the Bible has a very intense approach to studying the Bible. I could talk for an hour about it and how he engages in context-driven exegesis… but that would probably only be interesting to a few of us. Instead, I want to share a quick synopsis of his guidance to people studying narrative texts (like Exodus). He says:

“When reading narrative texts approach them like a novel. The author has an agenda or plan. Discover it. Every detail matters. Every character is significant. Keep an eye out for:

1. Symbolism
2. Repeated words, ideas, or images.
3. Potential double meanings, irony, figurative language.
4. Order and style of introductions for characters, lists of things, and relationships provided.
5. Omissions of details that might normally be provided.

All of this matters!”

-Dr. Michael Heiser

And today, (not to spoil the ending) the truth (or lesson) that is being communicated is about faith, trust and having a relationship with God.

So, let’s back up and summarize where Israel is and what they’ve been up to.

God’s presence has been traveling with Israel. Guiding them, providing for them, and teaching them.

Chapter 19: Israel came to Sinai

Exodus 19: 4-6 ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. **5**Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. **6**And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.’ This is the message you must give to the people of Israel.”

God says to the people: “You’ve seen what I’ve done. If you obey, you shall be my treasured possession. You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Now, Moses had brought the people to the base of the mountain so they could hear the Lord’s voice when he spoke to Moses. THEY COULD HEAR HIM SPEAKING!

Exodus 20:18-19 When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the ram’s horn, and when they saw the flashes of lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear. And they said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen. But don’t let God speak directly to us, or we will die!”

After God gives them the 10 commandments the people are afraid – loud, powerful voice – so they moved away from the mountain and asked Moses to just tell them what God said.

Exodus 24:3 Moses comes down and tells the people everything the Lord had said so far. They’ve got the 10 commandments, the other laws/rules, and the promise that they will be going to Canaan. The people respond “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do”

Exodus 24:9 Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel climbed up the mountain. **10**There they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there seemed to be a surface of brilliant blue lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself. **11**And though these nobles of Israel gazed upon God, he did not destroy them. In fact, they ate a covenant meal, eating and drinking in his presence!

Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and 70 elders all go up and see God – and they had a meal together! Moses goes up further to get more instructions and the tablets and sends the others back down to watch over the people while he is gone.

God gives Moses the rest of the info. **A way for God’s presence to be among his people again.**

Exodus 32: The people gathered against Aaron because Moses was gone for “too long”

Ironically, they want the same thing. **They want God’s presence to be among them**.

They had heard God’s voice, seen his miracles and missed being in contact with Him. But instead of waiting and following the instructions they had been given they began to think of a way to get what they wanted Now.

Have you ever been in this position before? Wanting something that you know is good… something that you know God also wants… but having difficultly waiting for God’s timing and for God to do it the way He wants to do it? And then decide… (if it’s even possible for you to do it) that you’re going to take matters into your own hands and fix the situation/problem yourself?

I’d also be willing to bet that while you’re struggling with this situation and decision to wait that you’ve had (perhaps) well-meaning friends give you advice about what You could do to fix the problem.. and encourage you down a path.

The people ask Aaron to make something special. See, back in this time period it was “common knowledge” that gods needed to have pedestals to stand on. The only god that didn’t seem to need something like this was Yahweh (the God of the Israelites). These “thrones” needed to be beautiful and describe the qualities of the god in order to entice the god to choose to come down and be there with them. A bull was a sign of power and strength – and a common symbol in that time and place for a god.

Aaron asks for the gold they took from the Egyptians. The gold rings that he asked for are “religious” in nature. They are similar to Christians today wearing gold crosses on necklaces. There are several other places in the Bible where this religious jewelry was discussed: Genesis 35: 4 Jacob told the people to give him their gold rings so he could bury them before they left to go back to Bethel. Judges 8:24-27 Gideon asked for the gold rings they took from the Midianites they conquered and he also makes a golden idol from them.

Why does Aaron participate? Well, Jewish tradition has several answers to this: including that his son, Hur, stood up to the people and said “No” and they killed him for it (and even though he was just identified as the #3 guy in charge just a few sentences ago, he is never mentioned again). Another explanation is that Aaron had figured that Moses was due back any time now and if he just stalls for a bit, Moses would be back and the problem would go away. So he would take all their “religious” jewelry and melt it down (which would be a good thing) – and then it would take a VERY long time for him to craft something for the people, which would give Moses more time to return. But something very interesting happens.

Aaron takes the jewelry, breaks it down with his tools and throws it into the fire to melt. And out pops a golden calf (Exodus 32:24 So I told them, ‘Whoever has gold jewelry, take it off.’ When they brought it to me, I simply threw it into the fire—and out came this calf!”). Now, again, this isn’t in the text but according to Jewish oral tradition this wasn’t Aaron giving some poor excuse about what happened “Oh, gee, Moses, I don’t know… it just kinda happened!” – Instead, it was because the sorcerers that were cast out of Egypt that were with the people were the ones that were pushing the agenda. They suggested the idea. They used their magic to make the idol appear. And then afterward they said to the people: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” The Biblical support for this comes from Exodus 32:7 – “Your people” “you brought.” Signifying the Egyptians, because the Lord’s people are the Israelites and He brought them out.

Now, regardless of whether or not we trust in that account of things, it is interesting that the very next thing Aaron says after the creation of this idol is that they should build an altar to the LORD and worship Him with burnt offerings and peace offerings.

So why mention all of this?

Because this is a relationship problem. God wants a relationship with his people. He has wanted it since Eden. And every time his people keep getting lured away by other false gods and idols. In Eden they were tempted by the serpent and disobeyed… Then afterward God was still with Adam & Eve, Cain & Able. But then the people turned to violence and evil and God started over with Noah, then Babel came and God split up the people into nations and started over with Abraham. And now these people that he JUST got done rescuing from oppression and slavery are being turned away again by these false teachers and sorcerers… and he’s ready to start over again with Moses. (Exodus 32:9-10) God is hurt and angry by the way his people have treated him.

But the people want a relationship with God too… they just keep going about it the wrong way. They keep getting fooled into trusting in false gods and idols or trying to bridge the gap between God and themselves through their own work (Like Babel). This is NOT the way God wants the relationship to be. He doesn’t want us to work really hard to draw closer to Him – He wants to be in our presence always and have us just love and obey Him. (Human Mindset Graphic, Jesus Mindset Graphic)

So Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people. He appeals to his logic, he appeals to his emotions, and he reminds Him of His promise. And God relents – because of his relationship with Moses and his love for his people.

So God stays constant and does what he always does… he removes the problem in order to allow his people to be healthy again. This time there are 3 consequences:
1st: God directs Moses to have 3,000 people killed. These people are likely the ones who were pushing for the creation of the calf or participated in its creation (perhaps the Egyptian sorcerers?) It is worth noting that Aaron is not included in this group or even gets in trouble for the incident… which tends to support the Jewish oral tradition story.

2nd: God sends a plague upon all of the people as punishment for going along with the plan and breaking God’s commandment.

3rd: God says that he will not be going with Israel to the promised land.

Now this 3rd consequence is a “test” of sorts for the people. He wants to know if they truly want to be with him or if they just want the good land and things God has promised them. He tells them he will send an angel – and this angel will guide them and lead them in the same way that he has been. God explains that they will still get everything that he promised them, but he will not go with them.

Their response is immediate and very telling:

Exodus 33:4 When the people heard these stern words, they went into mourning and stopped wearing their jewelry and fine clothes.

They respond with grief! They are told that they will get everything that they wanted – a land of their own, flowing with milk and honey – but they don’t care.

Then the text rapidly changes to a flashback. This is a Literary technique in order to teach a point.

It was Moses’ practice to take the Tent of Meeting[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+33&version=NLT#fen-NLT-2481b)] and set it up some distance from the camp. Everyone who wanted to make a request of the Lord would go to the Tent of Meeting outside the camp.

**8**Whenever Moses went out to the Tent of Meeting, all the people would get up and stand in the entrances of their own tents. They would all watch Moses until he disappeared inside. **9**As he went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and hover at its entrance while the Lord spoke with Moses. **10**When the people saw the cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, they would stand and bow down in front of their own tents. **11**Inside the Tent of Meeting, the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Exodus 33:7-11

This is to accentuate and give focus to the point that God and Moses had a relationship. A strong relationship. They spoke face to face as friends. The way God always wanted it.

Moses, as a result of this relationship and time spent with God has the ability to speak for the people and be blunt with God:

Exodus 33: 15 Then Moses said, “If you don’t personally go with us, don’t make us leave this place.

If you aren’t going, then we aren’t either. We don’t want the promise, we want you!

And so God relents and agrees to go with them.

The story has several lessons and truths to teach us, but only if we pay attention and apply these lessons to our own lives. The story is only helpful if we reflect upon its truths and examine our own hearts. So it’s time for some

Heart Questions

1. Who’s in charge here?

Now don’t skip past this question and just give the “obligatory” answer that you think I want (or God wants). Be honest. Who is in charge of your life? Do you allow God to lead you, direct you, speak to you, and wait on his timing? Or… are you like me and do that occasionally when you really need God’s help but the rest of the time you just “do it on your own.” In your own power, your own strength, and in your own way. Because “yeah, I think God would like this.” We come down pretty hard on these Israelites whenever we read this story about the golden calf.. but the truth is we create our own golden calfs all the time. We see a problem and jump right in to solve it the way we think we should. When all God wants us to do is slow down, be patient and allow him to work with us and through us.

1. Do you want God or His promises?

All God has ever wanted with us is a relationship. He knows you so intimately and loves you so much… and the only thing he desires is for you to know him and love him in the same way. And God has promised us some amazing things… He has promised us that we will live forever in heaven – and he has a room ready in his house for you. He has promised that he will judge the wicked and set all things right – and put an end to all sin and death in the world. And he has promised that he has plans to prosper you and for your good while you are still on earth. BUT… you have to examine your heart and confront yourself… Are you here “with God” because you want his promises? Or because you want Him? If God said he would give you all the things he promised, but he would not go with you… would you, like Moses say, No God, if you’re not going, then I’m not going. I don’t want the promises – I want you!