

AN AUTOPSY OF SPIRITUAL DEATH, AND THE ANTIDOTE FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE

EXODUS 32:1 - 33:6

Well, if you've been here with us through the last several months you'll know we are in a series in the book of Exodus called *Getting Out*, and we are actually getting to the end of that series -

lowdown on what is happening over next several months.

If you have been with us through this series you should really have memorized what the book of Exodus is all about. Exodus is the story of how God rescues his people out of slavery and brings them into salvation. Show timeline on screen.

If we were to draw a line with the ups and downs of Israel's story, the scene that is played out here in Ch. 32 is the lowest point of the Exodus story. As challenging as Israel's experience was in slavery, and as hard as their hearts were at times through the wilderness, what we see in this Chapter goes lower. This is the nadir of Israel's story so far. It's where God's people really hit rock bottom. In a lot of ways it is almost a scene of spiritual death.

I really enjoy watching TV series, though I haven't had as much time recently, but there is one series on ABC that my wife and I have been making time to watch every couple of weeks. The show is called *Forever* and it tells the story of Dr. Henry Morgan who is a medical examiner in New York City. Dr. Morgan works with the NYPD to solve murder cases by studying the bodies of the victim. Dr. Morgan in many ways is a student of death. But the hook to the show is that the reason Morgan is so interested in death and knows so much about how people die, is that he has died thousands of times himself. For 200 years, every time Henry Morgan dies he returns to life immediately in the nearest body of water. He can't die. The reason he studies death is to try in some way to understand his own condition, and unlock the curse that holds him.

This morning as we open up Ex. 32 that's what we are going to do. We are going to do an autopsy of spiritual death so that we can better understand our own broken condition, because in many ways this chapter serves as a case study in spiritual death. It is the pre-eminent biblical example of what the poison is that absolutely kills God's people - Idolatry.

And Moses, who wrote Exodus, is really making a case to us who read this story that the poison of idolatry is the greatest threat to the spiritual vitality of the people of God.

So this morning, if you want to understand what the greatest danger to your life, the greatest threat to our spiritual vitality as God's people, then you need to understand deeply what is going on in Ex. 32.

4 things about Idolatry. How Idolatry Begins, What Idolatry Costs. What Idolatry Ultimately Is, Why Idolatry Kills. Passage is disastrous but there is a Glimmer of light. Some hope. See hope

1. How Idolatry Begins.

Well, as the story opens, the author really sets the scene for us. Remember where we are. In Ch. 19 God's people had come to Mt. Sinai, the mountain of God, and they had set up camp in the valley below the mountain. And Moses as representative of Israel goes up the mountain to speak to God. And he comes down the mountain to give the Word of God to the people. In a way Moses is serving as both priest, representing the people before God and God before the people, and as prophet - speaking the Word of God to the people of God. And this happens a number of times - Moses going up the mountain to represent the people and coming down the mountain to bring the word of God to the people.

And in Ch. 24 there was this beautiful scene that we saw last week of Moses and Aaron and Nabab and Abihu and the elders of Israel going up the mountain and beholding Yahweh. And when that is over the elders and the rest of the leaders head down the mountain and Moses stays there meeting with God. And so when Ch. 32 opens, Moses has been up the mountain since Ch. 24... and you're going ok, how long was that? Well, according to the end of Ch. 24, he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. So he'd been up there nearly six weeks.

And it's that background that leads us to Ch. 32 v. 1: "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together."

The people are starting to get nervous. They are wondering if Moses is alive or dead, if he is ever going to come down the mountain to look after them. And so they grab hold of Aaron and look at their demand, "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."

And it's right here, in this moment, that Israel's idolatry begins, and it's the same place idolatry begins for us. They don't trust God. *Brothers and sisters, the fundamental reason for idolatry in your life, the foundation of why you so often substitute other things for God, is that you don't trust him.*

Do you see what is going on in their hearts? There are actually a couple of things they are saying here.

#1 They are wondering where *God is*. Look again at what they say. v. 1 still - "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." Well, you say, they aren't wondering where God is, they are wondering where Moses is. But the author is trying to make a point for us here. Who was it that brought them out of Egypt? It was God! Remember the great indicative statement that God makes in the 10 commandments - it is word for word what is said here. "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." To the people Moses is the declarer of God's words, he represents God, and so when they say, "we do not know what has become of him", they are saying, we don't know what has become of God.

And this isn't just a simple statement of fact - look at the scorn in their tone... "As for this Moses..." This is not sincere wonder at where God is, but what they are saying and how their saying it reflects a deep distrust of Moses, the man who God has appointed, and so it echoes a deep distrust of God.

Secondly, they are not only wondering where *God is*, but wondering how they're going to get where they want to go. Look at their request - "Make us gods who shall go before us." They are looking for something to take them where they want to go, to take them to the Promised Land, and with God seemingly silent they don't trust him to take them there.

We live in China as missionaries for several years, and we didn't have our own car, so our method of transportation was bikes and taxis. We'd probably ride a taxi 3-4 days each week, especially when winter came and you had days like today where you didn't really want to ride your bike anywhere. And I remember this one time we were riding home with our whole family from the grocery store, probably a 20 minute taxi ride, and taxi drivers in China usually work 12 hours shifts, but once in a while you'll find someone who is on a 24 hour shift, and every time I looked over at this driver he would be dozing off. We'd be going down the road, and I'd look over and he'd be doing the head bob. And if there is one thing you don't want to do in Chinese city traffic it's fall asleep. And I thought, I really don't know if we're going to get where we need to go, I might need to grab the controls because this guy is asleep at the wheel.

And in a very real sense this is what Israel is doing and it's what we do. The reason that idolatry is an issue in your life, and I guarantee it is an issue because you are a human being, is that you don't trust God, and more specifically, you don't trust him to actually go before you, to bring you to the Promised Land.

I know some of you are thinking, "of course I trust God, I'm a Christian." And objectively that's true, but what are you trusting in on a functional level? Let me tell you what I mean by that.

You see, to God's people the Promised Land was this place of rest. It was the place flowing with milk and honey where their hearts and their stomachs would be satisfied, it was the place of Shalom, this place of harmony and peace. It was the place of salvation.

And so my question to you is, on a functional level, on a daily basis, what are you actually trusting in for your salvation? What are you looking to to bring you joy, satisfaction and meaning in your life? You see an idol is anything other than Jesus that you are looking to save you. That you are looking to bring you what only he can.

And the sad truth is we're all here at various points in our lives. We need to check our hearts.

Can I talk to you young dads for a second? Because I am a young dad and I know what this looks like in my own heart. Why do you think so many young dads are so engaged in the workplace, in their jobs, but so checked out with their family? They work long hours, they get home late, and they are just disengaged in the life of the home? It's because there's an idol there..... Talk more on this..... affirmation etc. Indictment not of wives, but of husbands.

Maybe you're single here this morning. What are you looking to to lead you to the Promised Land - Jesus or marriage? Maybe you're entering your retirement years or already in them. What are you looking to to bring you joy and satisfaction? Comfort, financial security, health, being able to see your grandchildren? Or Jesus? Teenagers - on a practical daily level, I mean in the normal moments of your schedule, what are you looking to to save you? Popularity? Good grades? or Jesus?

Idolatry begins because you don't actually trust God. And the fact that we abandon him so quickly when he feels distant is just proof that we are actually only using God to get us what we really want. When he doesn't meet our agenda and purposes we just discard him for something else that we think will.

You don't trust him on a functional level to lead you where he says he will.

Well, look what happens next. v. 2, "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.' So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron."

Do you remember where all this jewelry came from? Where did Israel get all this gold? Remember that when God rescued Israel out of the hands of Pharaoh, he provided for his people to walk out with the treasure of Egypt. Egyptian neighbors took of their earring and bracelets and necklaces and just gave them to the Israelites. And now here, God's people are spending the very resources that God has provided on their own idols. Do you see the horror of this, that they would steward God's resources by spending them on their idols. But we do the exact same thing. Idolatry has a cost.

If you want to know where your idols are, one of the easiest ways to diagnose where the poison of idolatry is grabbing hold of you is to look where you are spending your resources. How are you using your time, your talent, and your treasure? Because where all of that is going will say a lot about what your heart is actually worshipping.

Sit down and look at your spending, if your married I'd encourage you to do that together with your spouse. If you're single maybe grab a wise friend that you respect to look at it with you. If half your monthly budget is being spent at Nordstrom or [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or Marlen's Whole Foods, there might be an idol there.

Now I'm sure all you savers out there are thinking, phewph, no idols there for me. But you're not off the hook either. You see, your saving can reveal just as much about the idols in your heart as your spending. Are you looking to your 401K, or your investments, or your rainy day fund to save you, or are you looking to Jesus? I am not saying don't be responsible in stewarding what you have, but our hearts can deceive us. What do your spending and your saving say about what you are serving?

A great word that I heard from a pastor this past week was, "Spend where you want your heart to go." Whether it is your time, talent, or your treasure, if you want to see your heart move away from idols toward the living God, spend where you want to go.

So we've seen How idolatry begins and what it costs, lets look now at what idolatry ultimately is.

Let's continue on in v. 4 (read through v. 6).

Idolatry is ultimately worship replacement. You see, God has created you to be a worshipper. The question is not whether you worship, its what you worship.

My daughters decided that they wanted to use the vacuum to vacuum out our van last week. So I got them set up with the vacuum cleaner, turned it on for them, and they went at it.

When I went out to check on them, of course they don't know how to turn this thing off, and its loud, so I'm asking them how it's going, and they're turning around every which way with the vacuum still sucking, pulling in hair and clothes and whatever is in front of them. And that is what worship is like. You can't turn it off. You can only control where it is pointed. And here Israel directs their worship, not to God but to an idol.

And its easy to miss in the passage, but the author is setting up for us an almost exact parallel of Israel's worship of this idol with their worship of Yahweh back in Ch. 19-24. Let me run through the similarities very quickly. First, look at what the people say when they see the golden calf - v. 4 - "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" What were God's words in Ch. 20? "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Then look at Ch. 24. We read this last week, but look again at what happens, how God's people meet with him. Ch. 24:3-11. Do you see the parallels here? The altar, the offerings, the eating and drinking. In form this is all just a substitution of the worship that God has prescribed. The only difference is the object of their worship.

So the ultimate nature of idolatry is this... God has created us a worshippers, but we worship things other than him. This is the central problem for God' people throughout the entire Bible. Jeremiah, writing to God's people at a different time in their history says this - Jer. 2:11-13. Do you see what he is saying about the appalling nature of idolatry? That we would take the most wonderful, beautiful, satisfying, fulfilling, spectacular, glorious being in the entire cosmos, the Creator of everything and exchange worship of him for worship of his creation, is utterly horrific. We need to recognize and be convicted of what we do brothers and sisters.

When you click on that celebrity bikini picture on Fox News, you are saying, this is more glorious and beautiful than God. When you spend your energy and time and thoughts striving after affirmation from others you are saying that others are more valuable and important than God. When all your energies over Thanksgiving are bent toward getting that Black Friday deal you are saying this stuff is more satisfying and fulfilling than God himself. Do you see the horror of that?

It's no wonder then that we see God respond as he does. Read 32:7-10. Remarks on "your" people, and God starting over with Moses. God is not a moody teenager here folks. There is a gravity to God's jealousy for his own glory and his own name. God is zealous that his creation would honor and glorify him as Creator, and he is justly angry when they don't.

Well, Moses ultimately comes down the mountain and sees with his own eyes what Israel has done. In his anger he throws down the tablets of stone that God has inscribed with

his law and they shatter at the foot of God's mountain. And Moses does this strange thing. He takes the golden calf and burns it and grinds it into powder and puts it in the water and makes the people drink of it. It's actually quite strange, but there is something significant that we need to see here.

Alec Motyer, one of the most well respected commentators on Exodus puts it this way. He says that "Israel is made to drink the cocktail of her own sin." Idolatry kills because eventually we'll have to drink its poison.

Idols are great while they work for us. Living for my children's success seems to work great until my children fail. You see, anytime we make something more ultimate than God, when we look to something to bring us what only God can, when that thing fails us we will be angry, bitter, and distraught. If you live by people's praise, you'll die from their rejection. If you look for ultimate joy in your health, you will despair in your sickness. Whatever you look to other than God will at some point fail you and you will have to drink idolatry's poison.

For Israel things get worse before they get better. The Golden calf episode is a disaster for God's people. The Levites end up putting to the sword 3000 men of Israel, at the end of the chapter we find that the Lord sends a plague on the people because they made the calf. And beyond all those catastrophes is the stark reality that God's presence is no longer going to be with his people. Look at Ch. 33 and v. 3 - "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." This is disastrous for God's people. Do you see how I said at the beginning that this is rock-bottom for Israel? This is spiritual death. All because of idolatry.

In the New Testament Paul writes that this story should serve as a warning to us. 1 Cor. 10:6-7. But if we leave there with "do not be idolators" we leave hopeless.

But hope glimmers in this passage. There is this faint light that we can barely see, but that points us to what God wants us to grasp.

We skipped over it initially, but twice in this passage Moses pleads before God for the people of Israel. As a priest does, he represents the people of God before God. vv. 11-14. After Moses' first intercession God relents. God mercy to his people. But there is still something missing. At the end of the story Moses intercedes again. Look at v. 30.

Moses says to God - God not only would you give them mercy, would you not destroy them, but even more would you forgive them. Would you give them an experience of your grace? And Moses makes a proposal, and the proposal is this. that God would take the sin of God's people and lay it on one man. Moses is saying, God, let me be their representative. Let

me stand in their place. Punish me for their sin. Kill me instead of them. And on this side of the cross we expect God to say yes right, but he doesn't. Instead God simply says this - "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book." In other words, I'm not accepting your proposal, whoever has sinned will be punished.

Why does God not accept Moses' proposal? It's because God is waiting for a greater Moses. You see, Moses could not atone for the sin of the people. Moses was still sinful himself. Just as Israel hadn't perfectly fulfilled God's covenant, neither had Moses. He would also have to bear the punishment for his own sin. But there was one greater than Moses who was to come. A lamb spotless and pure, without blemish. You see, Jesus came to earth. And Matthew presents Jesus over and over again as the faithful Israel. Jesus in his life fulfills all of Israel's experience. God rescues him from a great slaughter of baby boys, he brings him up out of Egypt. Just as Israel at the Red Sea Jesus goes through the waters of baptism and then into the desert where like Israel he is tempted, but unlike Israel Jesus remains faithful to the covenant. Then Jesus goes up the mountain to deliver God's law to God's people in the sermon on the mount. But when Jesus comes down from the mountain look at what happens. The first person Jesus encounters is a man with leprosy. Jesus touches him and immediately the leper is cleansed. The plague is gone because Jesus has absorbed it. Everywhere Jesus goes he is absorbing in himself the poison of idolatry and sin. And ultimately at the cross Jesus does what Moses couldn't do - he bears in his body the fiery wrath of God against your idolatry and mine. He makes atonement for God's people.

It is this that deals not only with the punishment of our idolatry but begins to root out all the causes of idolatry. When we look to the cross and see God's love and faithfulness it rids us of any distrust that God is not out for our good. See the beauty and glory of Christ it transforms our hearts to worship him.

Israel - no presence. God's presence promised on the basis of their obedience to the covenant.

Us - God's presence - Matt. 28. Jesus presence promised on the basis of HIS obedience to the covenant.