

God is Vindicated
Exodus 32 part 2

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Two weeks ago Keren got on Facebook and posted a question to get some help from friends. She asked what the best thing to do in Hawaii is. Several responded with tips about hikes to take, whale watching tours, beaches to be sure to visit, and one of our elders, **Steve Totten** also made a post. Here's a picture of Steve. He has been serving at this church for more than 30 years. He is a wise, kind, and loving man. He said he hadn't been to Hawaii since very early on in his marriage, which was a long time ago, but he highly recommended going to the zoo. He said that when I was there, they had incredible exhibits. Keren responded to his post and asked, "Did they have dinosaurs back then?" It was all fun and games until my paycheck was docked the next week!

There are some mistakes you don't want to make. Some mistakes have serious consequences. Last week we looked at the first six verses of Exodus 32 and we saw the incredibly significant mistake they made! Today I want to focus on the rest of the story. For those who weren't with us, let me give a quick recap. The Israelite people have been set free from slavery and brought to Mount Sinai. They entered into a covenant relationship with God and then God began to show them what he wanted from their lives - what it looks like to live in a right relationship with him. In chapters 24-31, Moses was receiving from God regulations about worship--the tabernacle, the high priest, sacrifices...and as Moses was receiving that revelation from God the people were waiting, and waiting, and waiting. And they didn't want to wait any longer. So they went to Aaron, Moses' brother, the second in command and said, "Who knows what happened to Moses. He may never come back. We want to start worshipping now!" So they took off their gold jewelry and gave it to Aaron. Then Aaron melted it down and shaped it into the shape of a calf, and they worshipped this calf as the god who brought them out of Egypt. It's really important to remember that they weren't trying to invent a new god, to just make up a new deity out of thin air. They were trying to worship the one, true God. They held a festival in the name of YHWH—God's personal name—but they were worshipping God in the wrong way. Instead of waiting for God to reveal how he wanted to be worshipped, which God was revealing to Moses, they ended up worshipping God in the way they saw the culture around them worshipping their deities...the figure of an animal, singing, dancing, illicit sexual activity, seeking their own pleasure and gratification. Last week we learned that not everything that is called worship is true worship. You can't just plaster the name of Jesus over it and call it good. If we want to get our worship right and not wrong (And remember, worship is way more than just what we do here on Sundays. It's how we live our lives) we have to make sure that our worship is centered on Jesus, not ourselves, informed by the Scriptures, not our culture, and our focus is on glorifying God, not satisfying ourselves. We don't want to worship in a way that distorts God's character, strips him of his glory and majesty, and reduces him into our image. We want to worship in a way where we see God for who he truly is, and as we honor him, we are actually shaped into his image--we become holy as he is holy, and loving as he is loving.

Last week we saw how the people got worship wrong. Today, we see the consequences, the aftermath. If last week was like looking at someone at a bar throwing back 10 or 12 drinks and then getting in a car, today is like driving on the road and pulling up to the wreckage. There are always consequences, sometimes catastrophic consequences, when we get worship wrong.

7 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. 8 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. Exodus 32:7-8 Did you catch the subtle way God is distancing himself from the Israelites? Look at the pronouns he uses. **Your** people, who **you** brought up out of Egypt. Parents do this today, too. This happens in my home all the time. I remember when Hudson gave us his first smile, when he crawled for the first time, when he took his first steps...Keren exclaims, "Look at our son. Look at our son." But when there is a poopy diaper or he does

something **like this**, guess whose son he is then. That's right! Look what your son did...and it's dad's responsibility to clean up. It kind of feels like that's what God is doing here. If these people want to worship that calf as god, then let the calf be their god. Moses, these are now your people, not mine.

9 “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. Then I will make you into a great nation.” Do you see how seriously God takes their idolatry and their unfaithful worship? This isn't a small matter. He's ready to destroy them and start his redemptive plans all over again with Moses. But Moses interceded for the people. He said, “God, if you destroy the Israelites, what are people going to say? All the nations around us know that you are the God who rescued them out of Egypt, that you delivered them and took ownership of them, that you enter into a covenant relationship with them. So now if you destroy them, your name will be dishonored. Everyone will think that you are a capricious and malevolent God.” So Moses appeals to God's reputation, and also to God's promises. He says you swore an oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to the ancestors of the Israelites—you promised to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Moses reasons: if you destroy these people, how will you be able to keep your promises? We read in 32:14 **Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.**

So God withholds his wrath, but there are still consequences. Take a look: **32:19 When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.** It's easy to read this and think, “Moses really lost his lid. Guy needs to check into an anger management class or something.” We'd be wise to recognize that this wasn't a random act of rage. This was a purposeful act of symbolic significance. The people had broken the Ten Commandments. Now they watch their leader take those Ten Commandments, throw them against the ground, and shatter them. When Moses breaks the Ten Commandments it's a visual representation of what they had already done.

It reminds me of a story from **Tim and Kathy Keller**. In their book on marriage they tell of a time Tim had been promising to dial back his work commitment for years. He kept making promise after promise, but no matter how many promises he made, he kept the exact same crazy work schedule that prevented him from putting his family first. One day Tim came home and found Kathy on their back deck, in one hand she had fine china they received as a wedding present years before, and in the other she had a hammer. Tim watched in confusion and fear as she raised her right hand and smashed the fine china. She shattered the first plate. Shattered a second plate. Shattered a third plate. Finally she relented. Tim rushed to her and said, “What's gotten into you?” She said, “You've been promising me for years that you would put our marriage first, that you would spend quality time with our kids. Your words are empty. You're ruining our family. All you do is work; your kids barely know you...I'm shattering our wedding china because that's what you're doing to our wedding vows.” Tim said when he heard those words, he staggered backward. He knew she was right. He said, “You better believe that what she did got my attention. Seeing visually to the plates what I had been doing emotionally to my family shook me into finally making a change.” Weeks later Kathy told him the three plates she shattered were three extra pieces in the set. And that she would have never done that with stuff she actually wanted to use again. Smart woman. When someone takes something of symbolic significance and shatters it in front of you, you take notice. That's what Moses did. But that's not all...

32:20 And Moses took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. Think about that. All that gold, melted down, ground into powder somehow...and then poured into the water for the people to drink. They had to consume it. And again, that wasn't Moses trying to be vindictive or punitive. It was purposeful. It has symbolic significance. He's teaching the Israelites an incredibly valuable lesson. What's he teaching them? Even if you think that idolatry is something that you do “out there” idolatry always comes back to

affect you “in here.” Sooner or later, if we worship God unfaithfully, we have to absorb the aftermath. We have to suffer the consequences of our unfaithful worship.

After dealing with the people, Moses goes to his brother Aaron, whom he left in charge while he was gone to figure out what happened, and tries to figure out how all of this happened under his watch. **21 He said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?” 22 “Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. 23 They said to me, ‘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.’ 24 So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”** Is that not the weakest excuse you’ve ever heard?! This would be like me getting pulled over for speeding going 100 mph and the officer looks at my license and says, “What in the world were you thinking?” And I just kind of shrug my shoulders and said, “My wife handed me the keys...I put them in the ignition...and the car basically drives itself.” That’s what Aaron says: “They gave me the gold. All I did was put it into the fire, and then magically, without my doing anything, out came this calf.” Aaron is trying to distance himself from the responsibility, but he’s lying. Look at what it says in **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.** It didn’t just come out of the fire that way, Aaron handcrafted it. It was his work of art. He put time and attention to make sure it looked just right. When all the people were going crazy for the calf, he took pride in his work! He was reveling in what he had made. Now that the hoopla is over, he’s ashamed. And instead of owning up to his mistake and taking responsibility, what does he do? He plays the blame game. Does that remind you of anyone??? It reminds me of two people. One from the Bible, and one from today. From the Bible it reminds me of Adam. Think back to the garden...Adam and Eve, disobedience, God asks Adam what happened...what does he say? The woman you put here...she did it. So whose fault is this???? Probably her fault... if not her fault, probably your fault, God. It is so hard to take personal responsibility for idolatry, disobedience and examples of unfaithful worship in our lives. And that leads to the second person this reminds me of: Myself. And maybe you are a little bit like me in the fact that it’s really hard not just to look in the mirror, but to look other people in the eye and take ownership for the mistakes you’ve made. One thing that I’ve learned, not just from this passage, but from personal experience, is that as hard as it is to be honest with yourself and honest with others about your mistakes, it is always so much better than pointing the finger and blaming someone else. And here’s the thing - when we refuse to accept ownership and simply point the finger at other people, we’re not fooling anyone but ourselves. Think about it...no one is buying Aaron’s lie besides Aaron. Blaming others indicates that we are still very self-deceived, that we’re an immature leader, that we haven’t learned anything from our mistakes, and that we are too blinded by our pride to see our shortcomings.

Can I tell you something, from my own life and from all the leaders I work with: Nothing gets better when a person in authority (a husband, a parent, a boss, a teacher, a coach) points the finger and blames someone else. But there can be a radical change when someone takes ownership, asks for forgiveness, and then seeks the wisdom of God and others on how to get better from this point forward. That’s real leadership.

There were very severe consequences for the Israelites. **25 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. 26 So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him. 27 Then he said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” 28 The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Exodus 32:25-28** This is a challenging part of the Bible. The people suffer dire, lethal consequences for their idolatry. Three thousand people lost their lives. Why is it in here? Why does the Bible record it? I think this is God’s way of communicating to us

that he takes worship far more seriously than we realize. We are not to be flippant. We are not to be casual. We are not to be lackadaisical when it comes to the worship we offer God and the lives we live for God. We are to find out exactly what God wants, and then with his help, offer God exactly what he is asking for. Who we decide to worship and how we decide to worship are perhaps the two most important questions that we'll ever have to answer in life. And if this passage is teaching us anything, it's teaching us that it's not enough to get the answer to the first question right. It's not enough to decide, "yes, I want to worship the one true God." That could still lead to calamity. We also have to get the second question right, we have to decide to worship God in the right way, the way he has revealed, in the way he desires, in the way he deserves.

As I look at this passage there are so many takeaways we could offer, but there is one that stands out to me that wraps them all together. Here it is: **Unfaithful worship has unintended and unwanted consequences.** This is so important for us to look at because most of us aren't trying to be unfaithful in our worship! We're not trying to make bad choices that dishonor God. But if we do...if we get worship wrong, there will be consequences that we do not intend, and that we do not want.

I have a friend who was hunting years ago, and as he was making his way into the woods early in the morning, when it was still dark, he slipped and his gun hit the ground. It had a bit of dirt on it, which he brushed off. The sun comes up, a massive deer walks right in front of him. He pulls the trigger. BOOM! The deer runs off. He looks and his gun exploded. Even though he cleaned off the dirt on his barrel, dirt got in his barrel and the bullet couldn't escape. The gun was ruined. He was safe, but he could have lost his life. Did he do that on purpose? Of course not! He cleaned off all the dirt he could see. But there was something he couldn't see that put him in great danger. Do you see the connections? Most of us aren't trying to get worship wrong, but if we do, there are very real consequences.

As a pastor I have the unique privilege of getting to come alongside people during key seasons of their life. Sometimes it's joyful and celebratory, because I get to be there during their wedding or the birth of a child. Sometimes it's really challenging, because I get to be there in the aftermath of a tragedy. A secret addiction just came to light. An affair took place. When people are in their sin, they can't see clearly. Sin blinds them and deceives them. Then when it all comes to light, people have to look around and see all the collateral damage, the heartache, the destruction. Nobody thinks to themselves, "I want to tarnish my witness for Christ. I want to trample on my wedding vows. I want to ruin my relationship with my kids and send them into years of counseling to try to fix my mistakes. I want my friends to reorder their lives for the next year to help me try to get better." Nobody thinks that, but that's what happens...unfaithful worship has unwanted and unintended consequences. And it's not just the comparatively big things:

What about when we look at Jesus' words to freely forgive those who have wronged us, but we hold on to bitterness instead? What about when we see Jesus, who left the comfort of heaven so that we could know the love of God and be saved. Jesus called us to do the same, but we are unwilling to leave the comfort of our home and lay aside our preferences so that others could know the love of God and be saved. What about when we look to the cross and we see the sacrifice Jesus made and we hear from Scripture, "Whoever would come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross every day." But self denial doesn't sound like much fun. We'd much rather pursue the path of self-actualization...and then call it the blessing of God.

If we are not careful, both in big ways and much more likely in small ways, we get worship wrong. And if we get worship, there are always unintended and unwanted consequences. As God's people, as a church family, we have to make every effort to ensure that lives we live for God are exactly the lives he wants...lives of reverence and holiness, with purity and righteousness, with humility, compassion, and kindness, with sacrifice, generosity, and love. The life God is calling us to the life of Jesus. 1 John 2:6

says, **“Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.”** That’s the worship God wants. That’s our heart. That’s our aim - not just to claim to live in him, but to actually live like Jesus did.

Jesus is the one who makes all the difference. On the day that the Ten Commandments were brought down, they were in idolatry and 3,000 lost their lives. The Jews held a festival to remember that event. Do you know what that festival was called? Pentecost. Pentecost was such an important feast that every Jewish male, regardless of where they lived, was required to travel from their hometown and travel to Jerusalem to celebrate it. Pentecost celebrates the giving of the law, and remembers that upon breaking the law 3,000 people died. Do you remember how the book of Acts begins? Jesus has risen from the dead. There are Jews from all over the world who have traveled to Jerusalem. They are there to celebrate the giving of the law and the death of 3,000 people...and what happens? The Gospel is preached. The Holy Spirit is given, which replaces the law, no longer a long list of things we need to do and not do in order to be right, but God living inside of us, showing us the way, and how many people accepted the gospel and were saved? Acts 2:41 **“Those who accepted the message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”** **Three thousand.** That’s the difference that Jesus makes. He shows us how to live a life of true worship, he sends his Spirit inside of our lives to make it possible. When Jesus comes, we go from death to life. From destruction to salvation. From ruin to redemption. That can happen here, today. That can happen for you!

Invitation. Communion.