

06

SESSION SIX

The Sin of Idolatry

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we watch how Israel's sinful idolatry leads to a distortion of true worship and brings about God's righteous condemnation. Idolatry is dangerous because it distorts our view of God and corrupts our behavior, leading us away from God as He has revealed Himself and toward a false god who is powerless to save and transform us. We also see how Moses stepped in between God and the people and interceded on their behalf. As those who have Jesus Christ as our mediator, we trust in His power to overcome our idolatries and empower us for His mission.

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 32:1-14

THE POINT

Idolatry is putting something or someone in the place of God.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Idolatry was an ever-present danger for the children of Israel. You may think idolatry isn't something people still struggle with today. But remember that idolatry isn't just about the idol—it's about the human heart. And that's the root of the problem we see as we encounter Israel building a golden calf at the base of Mount Sinai. The first Christian martyr, Stephen, reflected on this sad moment in Israel's history, saying, "In their hearts [they] turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron: Make us gods who will go before us." (Acts 7:39-40). Idolatry then and now is a heart problem.

So what, exactly, is idolatry? Idolatry is putting something or someone in the place of God. Anything you look to in hopes of finding what only Christ can give (joy, security, peace, meaning, significance, identity, salvation, and so forth) becomes an idol. Many people don't believe idolatry is a problem because they only associate idolatry with shrines, temples, and carved images. But heart idolatry exists everywhere. Common idols include things like money, sex, relationships, the praise of others, competence and skill, appearance, intelligence, success, etc.

- **What are some reasons our hearts tend to create idols for ourselves?**
- **In what ways can our view of God become distorted by our idolatry?**

Option 2

Provide modeling clay or Play-doh® and invite students to create something that might resemble a golden calf or other idol people would have worshiped years ago. As students complete their projects, ask:

- **Would you worship the "god" you just created? Why or why not?**

Discuss how absurd it would be to worship something you created out of Play-doh®. Share that while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the Israelites became impatient and turned their hope and allegiance to an idol—a golden calf.

- **What are some things, besides God, that people put their hope in today?**
- **Why won't those things bring fulfillment?**

While we no longer worship literal golden calves, we turn our hearts away from God to the idols of money, popularity, power, image, materialism, and so forth. Remind students that only God is worthy of our loyalty and worship because He is a great, holy, and awesome God.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Idolatry is putting something or someone in the place of God.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Moses:** biblical patriarch; chosen by God to lead His people out of captivity and to the promised land
- **Aaron:** older brother of Moses; chosen by God as Moses' spokesman

PLOT

In the previous sessions, we've watched how God heard the cries of His people in slavery, rescued them from Egypt, and guided them into the wilderness. The right response to God's salvation is gratitude and worship. Unfortunately, Israel redirected their worship—not to their Redeemer, but to a golden calf idol.

In this session we watch how Israel's sinful idolatry brings about God's righteous condemnation. Idolatry is dangerous because it distorts our view of God and corrupts our behavior, leading us away from God as He has revealed Himself and toward a false god who is powerless to save and transform us. We also see how Moses stepped in between God and the people and interceded on their behalf. As those who have Jesus Christ as our mediator, we trust in His power to overcome our idolatries and empower us for His mission.

TIMELINE

THE GOLDEN CALF
Israel commits idolatry against God.

THE COMMANDMENTS (PART I)
God gives Israel instructions on how to relate to Him.

THE COMMANDMENTS (PART II)
God gives Israel instructions on how to relate to others.

THE PEOPLE FALL INTO IDOL WORSHIP

While Moses was up on the mountain getting instructions for the proper worship of God, the people were back at the camp making a calf for the worship of a false god. Even though the Israelites had gotten out of Egypt, Egypt hadn't gotten out of the people. Moses was absent for about forty days, and Aaron assumed leadership. The people told Aaron how they wanted to worship, and Aaron demonstrated what a leader without conviction looks like. He gave the people exactly what they asked for.

When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who will go before us because this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!” Then Aaron replied to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings that were on their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from their hands, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it into an image of a calf. Then they said, “Israel, this is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; then he made an announcement: “There will be a festival to the LORD tomorrow.” Early the next morning they arose, offered burnt offerings, and presented fellowship offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, then got up to play. (Ex. 32:1-6)

Why did Israel fall into idolatry? Why did they distort true worship? For the same reasons we, too, fall into idolatry.

1) We fall when we disobey the word of God. (Ex. 32:1a) Notice how sin works. We don't want to be told what to do. This tendency goes all the way back to the garden of Eden, where the serpent tempted our first parents by questioning God's Word.

Interestingly, Israel claimed to be worshiping “the LORD,” and they even proceeded to give offerings (vv. 5-6). Perhaps they thought they were worshiping the real God, but they were worshiping in a way that clearly violated what God said. Their hearts craved Egypt, as evidenced by this godless practice.

This distorted worship shows us the importance of knowing God for who He truly is and not how we imagine Him to be. Worship is built on a right perception of God as revealed through Scripture. In *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer said, “The essence of Idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.”

2) Like Israel, we will also fall if we distrust the purposes of God. (v. 1b)

The people said they didn't know what had happened to Moses. But they knew where he was! They simply didn't trust God's purposes. Notice the reason for their idol making. They grew frustrated with Moses' extended absence. Instead of trusting in God's purposes, they moved on.

Failure to trust God is sin, and it also leads to countless other sins. Israel wanted to get on with their journey. God, however, hadn't given them the itinerary. He only promised to go with them. But the impatient Israelites failed to trust God. Did they have any reason to doubt Him? Of course not—think of all the miracles and provisions up to this point!

3) Like Israel, we fall when we forget the grace of God. (vv. 2-4) The people were instructed to remove their rings, which came from their plundering of Egypt and served to remind them of the grace of God. How did they get Egypt's gold? God gave it to them. (See Ex. 3:20-22.) The gold came from God's victory. It pictured His grace and His faithfulness. But here Israel belittled God's grace. They offered what God gave them to an idol instead of using God's gifts for His glory. Here's how the psalmist described the scene: "At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped the cast metal image. They exchanged their glory for the image of a grass-eating ox. They forgot God their Savior, who did great things in Egypt" (Ps. 106:19-21).

4) Like Israel, we fall when we fail to use our gifts to the glory of God. We should enjoy God's gifts, be thankful for His gifts, and use His gifts to build the Kingdom, not for idolatrous devotion. Think about not just the gold, but the skill and time it took to make this idol! Instead of using this skill, this time, and this gold to honor God, they used it for idolatry. It leads us to a question:

- **How are you using your gifts of time, talent, and treasure for God's glory? Explain.** (p. 40, PSG)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Sin as Idolatry

Sin is not only a physical act of rebellion against God, such as lying or stealing, but it is also a matter of the heart. The physical displays of sin are the fruit of what has been birthed in the heart of a person. (See Matt. 15:10-20.) In Scripture, idolatry usually refers to bowing down to a statue made of wood or gold, worshipping created things instead of the Creator. But idolatry can take on more subtle forms: a seeking of approval, security, power, pleasure, etc. We can diagnose the idolatry of our hearts by examining the areas where the desires of our hearts have turned into idolatrous demands. (See Jas. 4:1-2.)

THE PEOPLE NEED A MEDIATOR BECAUSE OF THEIR IDOLATRY

Next, we see the Lord tell Moses to go down and confront the people because of their distorted worship. (See Ex. 32:7.) God was angered by how the people

exchanged His glory with an image of an ox (v. 8; see also Ps. 106:19-23). As a result, we see that idolaters deserve God's condemnation.

The LORD spoke to Moses: “Go down at once! For your people you brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly. They have quickly turned from the way I commanded them; they have made for themselves an image of a calf. They have bowed down to it, sacrificed to it, and said, ‘Israel, this is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’” The LORD also said to Moses: “I have seen this people, and they are indeed a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone, so that My anger can burn against them and I can destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” (Ex. 32:7-10)

The people chose to worship a created thing instead of worshiping the Creator God. The psalmist writes in Psalm 106, “So He said He would have destroyed them—if Moses His chosen one had not stood before Him in the breach to turn His wrath away from destroying them” (v. 23). What a remarkable statement about the work of Moses on behalf of the Israelites. In verses 11-14, we learn about intercession, particularly about Moses' important role of intercession.

But Moses interceded with the LORD his God: “LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people You brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a strong hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘He brought them out with an evil intent to kill them in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from Your great anger and relent concerning this disaster planned for Your people. Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel—You swore to them by Your very self and declared, ‘I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky and will give your offspring all this land that I have promised, and they will inherit it forever.’” So the LORD relented concerning the disaster He said He would bring on His people. (Ex 32:11-14)

- **What does it mean to intercede from someone?** (p. 41, PSG)

Simply put, *intercession* means, “stepping in between two parties in order to resolve a problem.” Invite students to share examples of when they have seen someone intercede on the behalf of someone else by stepping in to resolve a problem.

- **How can we intercede for others in prayer? Why is this important?** (p. 41, PSG)

TIMELINE

THE TABERNACLE

The tabernacle is built so that God may dwell among His people.

ATONEMENT SACRIFICES (PART I)

The burnt, grain, and fellowship offerings are explained.

ATONEMENT SACRIFICES (PART II)

The sin and restitution offerings are explained.

This story teaches us a lot about pleading to God for others. For starters, we should appeal to God's character and faithfulness in prayer. Notice how Moses appeals to God's compassion, God's past investment and reputation, and God's covenant faithfulness.

Second, we must seek the will of God, not our own selfish desires, in prayer. Moses didn't ask for personal glory here. God said that He would start all over with Moses, "I will make you into a great nation" (v. 10). This could have been flattering, but Moses cared more about the people fulfilling God's purposes of making them into a great nation. We too should pray in line with God's will; that is, making disciples of all nations, not desiring our own fame.

Third, we must believe that God answers prayer! This account in Exodus 32 is one of the best examples of how God responds to prayer. Because God is personal, He responds to prayer.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

In other passages of Scripture, God declared His holy anger as way of inviting intervention. In Amos 7:1-6, God shows Amos what He may do to Israel, but Amos intercedes, and God relents. In the Book of Jonah, the prophet announces God's threat to destroy Nineveh in forty days, but Jonah knew this was an invitation for the Ninevites to actually repent. They do repent, and God doesn't destroy them. The same thing happens here in Exodus.

When verse 14 says, "the LORD relented," it doesn't mean that God changed his mind. God was inviting Moses to pray. When Moses did, God turned away His wrath. God wasn't changing His plans; Moses carried out God's plans. In the end, God does in fact send a plague, but it was a lesser punishment compared to what was first mentioned (32:34-35).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Like the Israelites, we need a mediator who will intercede for us because of our own idolatry. Moses foreshadowed the final and ultimate mediator humanity would every need—Jesus. (See 1 Tim. 2:5.) Jesus, the Mediator greater than Moses, turned away the wrath of God from us through His intervention. (See John 3:16.) Without Jesus' work, we would all be justly condemned. But praise God for the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who rescues idolaters like us!

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why is it important that what we believe about God match up with what He has revealed about Himself in Scripture? What are the dangers if our opinions don't line up?** *If our beliefs about God don't line up with the reality of who God is, then the biggest consequence is that we won't know God. Our beliefs would be grounded on a figment of our imaginations, and not on God as He has revealed Himself to us in Scripture. Of course, there are additional consequences that follow if we don't truly know God as He has revealed Himself, such as not knowing how He would have us live, knowing right from wrong, and so forth.*
- **What is the relationship between our view of God and our behavior? What are some choices we make that come from a wrong view of God?** *Our beliefs about God influence the way we believe God would have us live. So if we have a wrong view of God and, for instance, don't believe that He created all people in His image, then we will likely live in such a way as to reflect that belief, which may involve discrimination and racism toward others.*
- **Make a list of common idols that you struggle with today and how they fail to deliver on what they promise.** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **Like the Israelites, what happens when we forget the past work of God's grace in our own lives?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

*God's Story of
Redemption
through His Son,
Jesus Christ.*

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Anything can be an object of idolatry. Usually, the better something is, the more likely people will idolize it. People live in bondage to sexual sin, in part, because the human body is an amazing creation. The same goes for food and relationships. But we must not take “good things” and turn them into “god things.” If we do, we will end up in a life of total bondage and corruption.

- **What are some good things God created that are often turned into “god things” by ourselves and others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some ways we can avoid falling into this type of idolatry?** *One way to prevent and/or address heart idols is by looking to Christ. To paraphrase Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18, we become what we behold, so if we are beholding the glory of God in the face of Christ, we will become more like Christ, transformed into His image.*



HEART

Because of Israel's rejection of God's Word, their lack of trust in God, their lack of gratitude for the grace of God, and their lack of desire for the glory of God, they fell into idolatry. This whole scene is a picture of distorted worship. They were doing everything their way instead of God's way. We must remember that worship is about glorifying God, not gratifying self. It's possible to do things in the name of the Lord but still not worship the Lord.

- **What are the signs that our worship has become “distorted” or focused on ourselves and our preferences rather than on God and what He has said?** *Some answers might include constantly singing songs that don't reflect your heart, serving in order to get the praise of others and not for the praise of God, focusing too much on preference of the style of music versus the content of the songs themselves, and so forth.*
- **What are some ways we can prepare our hearts for genuine worship during our time with others at church?** *Answers to this question will vary.*



HANDS

As we see with Moses, God calls us to intercede for people who need Him, appealing to His character and His will as we pray for their salvation. Part of that interceding takes place by speaking truth in love to others, as well as pleading that God's grace would intervene in their life.

- **How can we help one another turn to God instead of idols during difficult times?** *Answers will vary, but Hebrews 3:12-13 is a good text to reference.*
- **How would you describe the way you divide your time in prayer? How much time do you spend praying for yourself? How much time do you devote to praying for other people? What are those prayers like?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, point out item #8 to the students, which contains a poster of a cow labeled with different modern day idols. The poster can be simply shown to your group and used as a conversation starter regarding typical idols students struggle with, or it could be cut out and used as an activity for students to reconstruct.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/storystart15)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject