An Image of Idolatry

Summary and Goal
Moses had left the Israelites at the base of Mount Sinai and had gone to speak with God. But while Moses was receiving the law, the people were in rebellion, calling on Aaron to fashion a golden calf to fulfill their desire to worship something tangible. In this session, we will see what the heart of idol worship looks like and God’s rightful response to it—judgment. But once again, as we have seen so often throughout Exodus, we will see that God offers grace in the midst of His people’s disobedience.

Session Outline
1. Idol-worshipers distort true worship (Ex. 32:1-6).
2. Idol-worshipers deserve condemnation (Ex. 32:7-10).
3. Idol-worshipers require a mediator (Ex. 32:11-14).

Session in a Sentence
Any worship of something or someone else besides God is idolatry and is condemned by Him, but God is merciful to provide forgiveness.

Christ Connection
When the children of Israel sinned, they needed a mediator, Moses, to intercede on their behalf. Jesus Christ is the perfect mediator between God and sinful humanity, and He faithfully intercedes on behalf of His people.

Missional Application
Because Jesus is our perfect mediator who has brought us to God, we intercede for others who need salvation, appealing to God’s character and His will as we pray for their redemption and point them to Jesus.
GROUP MEMBER CONTENT

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in this shaded area throughout the session.

Group Time

Introduction

SAY: Every classic Disney movie includes a significant moment, one which drives the action in the film. These moments—often with singing—center on the main character expressing his or her greatest desire. In Beauty and the Beast, Belle yearns for a grand life outside of her small town. In Robin Hood, Robin is in love with Maid Marian and desires to be with her. In The Emperor's New Groove, Kuzco wants a summer home to show off his power and riches.

INTERACT: Ask the group the opening question on page 103 in the DDG.

What are some “I want” moments in your favorite stories? How do these wants compare to the wants we have in our own lives? (be prepared to give answers of your own to jump-start the conversation)

READ the following paragraph in the DDG (p. 103), connecting our desires to the idolatry in our own hearts.

Whether we realize it or not, we are driven by our desires. We reveal what we want through our words and deeds. It is evident in what we talk about, how we spend our time, how we use our resources, and what we post on social media. Usually the things we want are good, but sometimes, instead of allowing our desires to drive us to God, the One who provides all we need, we worship those desires instead. And often we don’t let go of those desires, even when we come to see they are not for our good, for the good of others around us, or for God’s glory. And in these times we see how idolatry did not merely exist in the days of the Old Testament; it exists today within our own hearts.

SUMMARIZE: In this session, we will see what the heart of idol worship looks like and God’s rightful response to it: judgment. But once again, as we have seen so often throughout Exodus, we will see that God offers grace in the midst of His people’s disobedience.

For additional teaching options and other resources, please visit www.GospelProject.com/additional-resources.
Point 1: Idol-worshipers distort true worship (Ex. 32:1-6).

SAY: All of us are worshipers. It’s just a matter of what we worship, which is whatever captivates our hearts and influences our lives. The first two of the Ten Commandments required the people to worship only God and prohibited them from making idols or visual representations of God. In essence, God was teaching His people to worship Him by faith. Yet the people weren’t satisfied. They wanted something good—God’s presence—but they wanted it sinfully—on their own terms.

READ Exodus 32:1-6 (DDG p. 104).

1 When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come, make gods for us 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!”
2 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.”
3 So all the people took off the gold rings that were on their ears and brought them to Aaron.
4 He took the gold from them, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it into an image of a calf. Then they said, “Israel, these are your gods, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!”
5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of it and made an announcement: “There will be a festival to the Lord tomorrow.”
6 Early the next morning they arose, offered burnt offerings, and presented fellowship offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to party.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 104) to show that the people’s intention may have been to worship the Lord, but God has called on His people to worship only Him and only in the way He has prescribed.

The golden calf was not an outright rejection of God. The Israelites mixed a sincere desire to worship the Lord with elements they had carried over from their pagan worship in Egypt, where the cow was a symbol of strength and fertility. But the people lapsed into idolatry because they focused on what they wanted—a god they could have on their own terms—rather than the Lord Himself. In this we see that the means of worship matters as much as the object of worship.

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to draw a representation of an idol in the space in their DDG (p. 104).

What do you picture when you hear the word idol?
**SAY:** Idolatry is not just a sin of the past. We are in just as much peril as the people who fashioned the golden calf because the worship of our hearts can be just as easily directed away from God. Our idolatry usually just looks different. We have replaced pagan practices with the desires of the heart (health, relationships, jobs, etc.).

**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the blanks in their DDG (p. 104) as you explain three characteristics of idols for the sake of safeguarding our hearts and minds.

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**Three Characteristics of Idols**

1. Idols are things that captivate our hearts or imaginations.

   The people may have been at Mount Sinai, but their hearts were still in Egypt, enslaved to sin. They wanted to be certain that God would lead them to their homeland, but this desire turned their hearts back to the idolatry of the Egyptians. Likewise, we often try to manufacture our own custom god: one who looks like us, sounds like us, and wants the same things we want.

2. Idols are things we trust for what only God can give.

   The things the Israelites wanted—to sense God’s presence, to know where they were heading, to have a homeland—were good things, but the Israelites couldn’t get these things on their own. And without God and His representative visibly present, they turned to a manufactured calf to give them what they wanted, but it could never satisfy their longings. We too look to people and things for what only God can give.

3. Idols aren’t God.

   This seems simple, but think for a second about common idols today, even the idols in your life. How do they compare to God? The God who created the world and everything in it, the God who became a human so we could know Him and be forgiven of our sin, the God who promises life to us. Every single idol leads us to the same place—open rebellion against the God who created us and has promised to provide for us.

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**PACK ITEM 12: LET ME DESIRE YOU:** Direct the attention of your group to this Anselm quote poster, and allow your group members a moment to pray on their own that they would turn from any idolatry in their hearts and desire the one true God who has taught us how to seek Him and has revealed Himself to us in His Son, Jesus Christ.
Point 2: Idol-worshipers deserve condemnation (Ex. 32:7-10).

**SAY:** The scene shifts from the foot of the mountain, where the people were throwing a party for their handmade god, to a conversation between God and Moses. A piece of gold fashioned to look like a cow didn’t know people were worshiping it, but the God who seemed so far away knew exactly what was happening.

**READ** Exodus 32:7-10 (DDG p. 105).

7 The **Lord** spoke to Moses: “Go down at once! For your people you brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly. 8 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, these are your gods, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’” 9 The **Lord** also said to Moses: “I have seen this people, and they are indeed a stiff-necked people. 10 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.”

**EXPLAIN:** Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 105) to explain that idolatry is always direct rebellion against the holy God.

Perhaps the people thought they were worshiping the one true God, but they broke His commandments. Our idols always reveal rebellion against God. In our foolishness, we turn our backs to God for a created thing that will never satisfy our desires.

**Commentary:** We don’t directly disobey by mistake. We do it on purpose. Every time. And each time we do, we reveal the rebellious heart within us that willfully made the wrong choice. Romans 1:21-22,25 paints a stark picture of how God sees direct disobedience or rebellion: “For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools … They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen.”

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following questions.

What are some people or things we expect to satisfy us? How do we respond when they fail to truly satisfy? (we pretend we are happy; we fall into a depression; we get angry; we return for more or we try to find satisfaction elsewhere; we feel guilty and ashamed; we blame God; we turn to God in repentance)
**EXPLAIN:** Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 105) to show how idolatry is robbing God of the glory due Him and it deserves condemnation.

The golden calf robbed God of the glory due Him. The idols of our hearts likewise seek to steal God’s glory. They make our desires, and more precisely *us*, the most important part of our story, but God made us for His glory (Isa. 43:7). Our idols will always fall short of what we expect them to do because they are created things meant for our enjoyment, not our fulfillment. Idolatry severs our relationship with God and renders us guilty and ashamed before Him.

**Commentary:** Idolatry is so terrible not only because we reject God but because we often seek our own glory from the very gifts God has given us. Remember the gold the people of Israel took on their way out of Egypt, the plunder God had given them (Ex. 3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36)? It was meant for the tabernacle, a true visual reminder that God was present and dwelling with His people, but they took that gold meant for God’s glory and used it for their own glory instead.

**SAY:** If God’s response to the people’s idolatry seems extreme, it’s because we don’t understand the weight of our rebellion against God. Our God, perfectly holy and perfectly just, will not tolerate sin.

**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 105).

**Guilt and Shame:** Guilt refers to the **objective status** of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it. Shame is the **emotional pain** that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.

**Essential Doctrine “Guilt and Shame”:** Guilt refers to the **objective status** of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it (Matt. 5:21-22; Jas. 2:10). Shame is the **emotional pain** that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.
Point 3: Idol-worshipers require a mediator (Ex. 32:11-14).

SAY: Our idolatry, like all sin, always separates us from God. Because God is holy, glorious, and good, only He is worthy of being worshiped. The only way for the Israelites to be reconciled to God was for God to show mercy to these undeserving people. Enter Moses: God’s chosen mediator between Himself and His wayward people.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Exodus 32:11-14 (DDG p. 106).

11 But Moses sought the favor of 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? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘He brought them out with an evil intent to kill them in the mountains and eliminate them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger and relent concerning this disaster planned for your people. 13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel—you swore to them by yourself 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.’” 14 So the Lord relented concerning the disaster he had said he would bring on his people.

EXPLAIN: Use the following paragraphs in the DDG (p. 106) to explain how Moses served as a mediator for God’s people and how he made his appeal to God for grace.

God had told Moses to step aside, to stay out of the way, so He could destroy the Israelites (v. 10). But Moses came to the people’s defense—just what God wanted him to do. After all, why would God need Moses out of the way to judge His people?

Moses did not try to dismiss the seriousness of the people’s sin; in fact, he would be enraged by it too (see vv. 19,22,31). Rather, he pleaded for God to cover their sin with His grace on account of His glory and faithfulness. And Moses’ mediation proved effective as God relented from His just condemnation.

Commentary: While it may appear that God changed His mind here, God’s plan all along was to glorify Himself by showing mercy to His people. Yes, God is completely just and sin will not go unpunished, but God is also faithful to His promises. Knowing God’s character, Moses appealed for the lives of the people.

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to review the Scripture passage and find how Moses appealed to God’s glory and faithfulness.

• God’s Glory: If God destroyed His people in the wilderness, then the Egyptians would have reason to deny God’s glory and bad-mouth His reputation as the all-powerful, all-good God for His people.

• God’s Faithfulness: If God destroyed His people in the wilderness, then He would renege on His promises to the patriarchs for offspring, land, and blessing.
**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the table in their DDG (p. 106) as you explain how Moses’ mediation pointed to the greater Mediator who was to come—Jesus Christ.

- Jesus came into the world as fully God and fully man. Because He is one with God, He is the perfect mediator between the holy God and sinful humanity deserving His judgment. Moses never could have substituted himself for the people because of his own sin, but Jesus’ sinless life meant He could stand in place of His people and lay down His life in exchange for theirs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moses, a Mediator</th>
<th>Jesus, the Mediator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Represented</strong> God before the people and the people before God (Ex. 18:19; 20:19)</td>
<td>The one Mediator between <strong>God</strong> and <strong>humanity</strong> (1 Tim. 2:5-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interceded</strong> for the Israelites (Ex. 32; Num. 12; 14; 16; 21)</td>
<td><strong>Always</strong> lives to intercede for His people (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator of the <strong>old covenant</strong> (Ex. 24:8)</td>
<td>Mediator of the <strong>new covenant</strong> (Heb. 9:15)</td>
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**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 106).

**Christ as Priest:** As our Great High Priest, Jesus accomplishes the work of **reconciling** us to God. He is the One who **intercedes** for us before the Father and **prays** for us to remain faithful.

**Essential Doctrine “Christ as Priest”:** As our Great High Priest, Jesus accomplishes the work of **reconciling** us to God. He is the One whose perfect righteousness is presented to the Father for our justification. He is the One who **intercedes** for us before the Father (Heb. 7:25; 9:24) and **prays** for us to remain faithful (Luke 22:31-32; John 17).

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

> What do you know about the character of God in Christ that should inform the way you pray for yourself and others? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)
**EXPLAIN:** Exodus 32 shows us how far sin can take us, but our Savior’s mercy goes much further. The Israelites’ sin nearly wrecked their relationship with God, and if God had not been merciful to them, their idolatry would have separated them from Him forever. We too have worshiped idols over the living God. Though God would be perfectly just to condemn us for our sin, He chose another way to punish sin, one that would reconcile us to Himself. All the punishment we deserved for our sin was placed on our mediator, Jesus Christ, who died in our place and rose again and now sits at the Father’s right hand, where He continues to intercede on our behalf. Praise God that His grace, not our idolatry, has the final word on our relationship with Him.

**READ** the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 107), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because Jesus is our perfect mediator who has brought us to God, we intercede for others who need salvation, appealing to God’s character and His will as we pray for their redemption and point them to Jesus.

- **Ask the Lord to help you identify idolatry in your heart; then repent and find forgiveness in Christ and pray for help to worship God alone.**
- **What are some ways your group can help support and intercede for you as you strive for purity in your life and worship?**
- **How will you pray this week for an unbeliever in light of God’s character in Christ? What steps will you take to share the gospel with this person?**

**CLOSE IN PRAYER:** Father, to You alone belongs worship and praise. Yet we have sinned by pursuing idols and deserve Your condemnation. Thank You for Your provision of Jesus, who is fully God and fully man, as the perfect mediator who has brought us near to You through His life, death, resurrection, and intercession. Help us by the power of the Spirit to implore others to find reconciliation in Him. Amen.

**INSTRUCT:** As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 108-110), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 111) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 108-110) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 111) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

**Daily Study**

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 108-110) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 3 as a part of point 3 in the session: Christ is our mediator, and He makes constant appeals to the Father on our behalf, not based on what we have done or might do but on what He has done and the righteousness He has given us.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 1:** “God is never far off and He always works in His perfect timing, even if it does not feel that way.”
- **Day 4:** “All our sin is forgiven, but even the ‘smallest’ sin is still an act of open rebellion against God and dishonors Him.”

Visit [www.GospelProject.com/Blog](http://www.GospelProject.com/Blog) for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

**Encourage One Another**

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 111) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to pray for one another with confidence because of Jesus’ effective ministry as our Great High Priest.**
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

Point 1: Idol-worshipers distort true worship (Ex. 32:1-6).

“When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down presents the situation from the viewpoint of the people. The preceding verse about the Lord having finished speaking and having given Moses the tablets, plus 24:14,18, indicates that their notion was mistaken. Moses could not have returned sooner; he had been summoned by the sovereign Lord and could leave only when dismissed. Their way of speaking about this Moses, the man who brought us up from Egypt, gives insight into their ungrateful attitude. What they said was insulting to Moses and also to the Lord, since it ignored his involvement. It matched their earlier complaints (14:11-12; 16:2-3,6-8; 17:3). The assumption seems to be that Moses (not to mention Joshua) had abandoned them.”

“They worshiped the calf (v. 5) and offered the same burnt offerings and peace offerings to the calf that they had offered to Yahweh shortly before (24:5). The Scripture roundly condemned their actions as apostate. The Israelites dared to worship ‘gods’ (plural), breaking the First Commandment (20:3). They made and worshiped an idol, breaking the Second Commandment (vv. 4-6). They associated the name ‘Yahweh’ with pagan idolatry, breaking the Third Commandment (v. 7). Yahweh called Israel to be different from its neighbors whose gods were symbolized through idols.”

Point 2: Idol-worshipers deserve condemnation (Ex. 32:7-10).

“The Lord seems to be distancing himself from the covenant people of Israel. He had called them ‘my people,’ but now he calls them your people (32:7) and these people who are stiff-necked (32:9; see 5:1; 8:21). The description ‘stiff-necked’ probably derives from animals like donkeys, which can be perverse and obstinate in their refusal to turn in the required direction. The Lord tells Moses to leave him so that in his anger he can burn Israel to destruction for breaking his covenant (32:10). Then the Lord declares that he will make Moses’ descendants into a great nation instead.”

“We become like what we worship (vv. 7-10). This point, illustrated in Exodus 32:7-10, was also made in Psalm 115:4-8 … Israel illustrated this truth in a number of ways. They became spiritually lifeless like the idol. They became corrupt and nasty like cattle. Psalm 106 said they exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass (v. 20). The psalmist noted the disgusting digestive process of cattle. This may be why the story in Exodus included Moses grinding up the bull and serving it to them. He might have put it into the water supply so that it could get digested and become unusable filth. Notice also that Israel became ‘stiff-necked’ and stubborn like unruly cattle (Ex. 32:9). They had gotten ‘out of control’ like cattle (32:25). They had to be led like cattle (32:34). Hosea 4:16 said, ‘Israel is as obstinate as a stubborn cow.’”
“In saying ‘Now leave me alone’ God made a rhetorical demand. He was challenging Moses rather than commanding him. Moses had no power to stop God from doing anything, so there would have been no need whatever for God to ask permission of Moses to do something through the statement ‘leave me alone.’ Rather, it was a rhetorical way of saying to Moses: ‘Here is what I will do unless you intervene.’ For God to announce to a prophet (Moses being the paradigm for all future prophets) his intention to do something as a way of inviting intercession has many parallels, the most famous perhaps being those of Amos 7:1-6, where God showed Amos things he was planning to do by way of judgment upon Israel and then, in response to Amos’ intercession, relented. In that context he was clearly inviting Amos to intercede so that he (God) might relent. A similarly prominent example is found in Jonah’s required announcement that Nineveh would be destroyed in ‘forty days’ (Jonah 3:4), a message Jonah reluctantly gave because he knew that it represented an invitation to repent and not an irreversible condemnation.”

**Point 3: Idol-worshipers require a mediator (Ex. 32:11-14).**

“The same terms describe the anger of both the Lord and Moses (vv. 10-11,19,22). Moses agreed with the Lord’s assessment that the Israelites were stubbornly rebellious (‘stiff-necked,’ v. 9; 33:3,5; 34:9) and called what they had done ‘grave sin’ (v. 31). ‘To what end? For what purpose?’ is the point of both questions (cp. Gen. 25:32; 27:45-46; Deut. 5:24; Judg. 15:10; Ruth 1:11).”

“Moses responds to the Lord’s statement about destroying the people and making a nation out of him (v. 10), appealing to God’s own reputation among the Gentiles (whom God intends to bless through Israel, cf. 19:6; Gen. 12:2-3) and his promises to Abraham (Ex. 32:11-13). Moses’ intercession on behalf of the people results in the Lord’s relenting from consuming them entirely (v. 14; see also Num. 14:12-21). However, Moses himself will be a means of judgment on some of the people (Ex. 32:26-29), and the Lord will judge them further through a plague (v. 35).”

**References**

The Books of Genesis and Exodus are meant to be read together, providing an important clue for our approach to the rest of Scripture. The story begins in Genesis and unfolds with breathtaking speed, but then the pace slows as the rest of the book tells us the story of four generations of the one family through which God promised to bring blessing to the world.

As Genesis winds down, we encounter Joseph, one of Abraham’s great grandsons, and see that God’s promises are not always easy for His people. But through Joseph’s difficulties, we encounter the vital concept of redemption. His life was one of setbacks, frustration, and disappointment. But all the while, we see that God was at work through Joseph’s adversity, not despite it. God brought about redemption for Joseph and his family: God is always bringing glory to Himself and good to His people through their hardships, even by overriding their sins.

Then as we move from Genesis to Exodus, we pass over nearly four hundred years to a time when God’s people are enslaved. The stage is set for an even greater display of God’s desire and ability to redeem His people. When they cry out to God for deliverance from their slavery in Egypt, He provides a rescuer in Moses to free His people and to provide for them.

God’s deliverance of Joseph and the nation of Israel were the early stages of a beautiful crescendo of God’s plan to redeem His people that culminated in Christ Jesus. In Him we have experienced redemption from the slavery of sin and death. As we study these sessions, let us pray that the Holy Spirit stirs our hearts anew so that we are captivated by the love, grace, and mercy of God made known to us in our redemption through Christ so we can share Him with others.
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