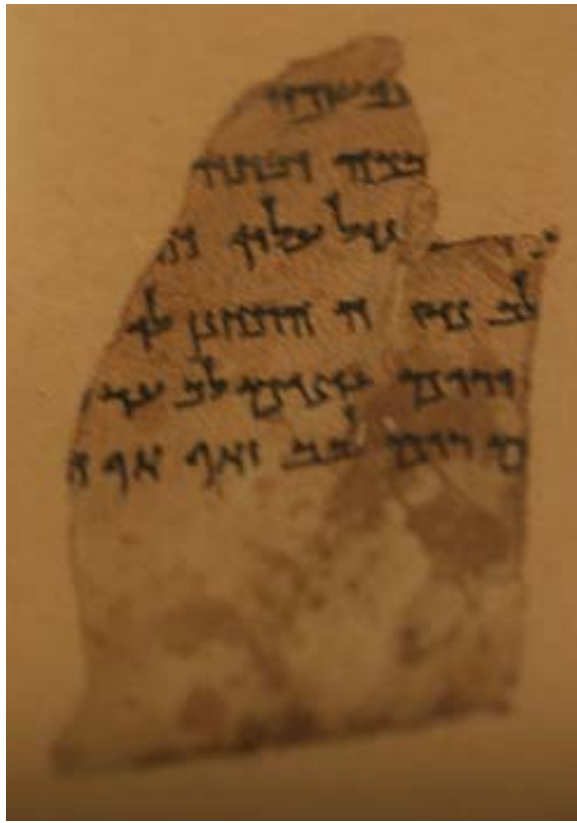


*The Covenant Pulpit*



# EXODUS

*Possessing the Promises*

“GOLDEN CALVES”  
EXODUS 32

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Philosopher Sorën Kierkegaard wrote, "It is the normal state of the human heart to build its identity in something besides God."

Surely that was true of young Howie.

As a child he was almost deaf. After classmates made fun of him, he threw away his hearing aids. As a result, he lived with an incessant ringing in his ears. It nearly drove him insane, and then filled him with rage—especially when God didn't answer his desperate prayers for relief. So Howie developed an implacable hatred of all things religious. By the time he was a teenager, his credo was set for life: if you can't depend on God for help, you have to become your own god.

Early on, Howie fell under the spell of his hypochondriac mother. Her paranoia of the bacteria that bred in the hot dampness of Houston, Texas drove her to shield him from anyone or anything that might carry germs. If he got the slightest sniffle, she rushed him to the doctor. In the end, this paranoia would turn him into the world's most famous recluse.

As a teen, Howie was sent off to school in the dry, healthy climate of rural Southern California. There he discovered the two loves of his life: Hollywood and aviation. Lost in the magic of a movie, he forgot the ringing in his ears. Soaring high in an airplane, it stopped altogether.

He was only seventeen when his mother and father died, making him an instant multi-millionaire. He boasted to friends, "I'm bigger and richer than God." He set out to become the king of Hollywood, producing a string of movies—including two nominated for Oscars. He discovered Jean Harlow and Jane Russell and had affairs with Lana Turner, Katherine Hepburn, and Bette Davis. Later he had romances with Errol Flynn, Gary Grant, and Tyrone Power. It's no wonder that he came down with incurable syphilis.

Howie also set his sights on becoming the king of the air. He built the H-1 Racer, the fastest airplane in history. In September of 1935, he flew to Paris in half the time it had taken Charles Lindberg, shattering all speed records. Then he stunned everyone by flying around the world in three days. He parlayed his father's business into the biggest supplier of parts and weapons for the Air Force and Navy. Along the way he founded TWA and became a household name as Howard Hughes, the first multi-billionaire in history. He bragged that he was not only richer than God, he was more powerful.

But his bravado hid the fact that his syphilis was spreading. His old paranoia of germs had returned with a vengeance. He moved to Las Vegas for the clean desert air. He bought the Desert Inn Hotel and Casino and turned the top floor into his private sanctuary. There he lived like a hermit in a sanitary bubble. Then his agents bought up casinos surrounding the Desert Inn to extend his perimeter of control. When he feared that the testing of nuclear weapons in Nevada might expose him to radiation, he spent millions bribing Lyndon Johnson, and later Richard Nixon, to stop the

tests. When he suspected a Communist plot to unleash biological warfare on America, he funneled millions to the CIA to fund clandestine operations. Howard Hughes was becoming the ultimate control freak.

He got to the point where he was downing bottlefuls of medicine every day. Green peas were almost the only food he ate. Then he worried that he could choke to death on them. So he had each pea measured to make sure it was small enough. A barber came in once a year to cut his hair and fingernails. He kept a team of doctors on full time alert, refused to wear clothes lest they hid germs, and walked around in Kleenex boxes for shoes. He never touched anything unless he was holding a paper towel in his hand. If a flu or cold epidemic hit the area where he was staying, he jetted off to a new hotel in another part of the world.

Around his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, he fell into a coma. He was rushed by jet to Houston, but on August 5, 1976 he died in transit. He was worth four billion dollars. But his 6'4" frame had been starved down to ninety pounds. His body was covered in filth, his hair and beard were tangled and rancid, his fingernails looked like a bird's claws, and his arms were riddled with holes. X-rays showed broken needles still lodged under his skin. The autopsy revealed that he had died of renal failure and his brain was eaten away by syphilis. His body was so unrecognizable that the FBI took fingerprints to prove it was really Howard Hughes.

When he was 17 years-old, Howie vowed that he would be his own god. As a billionaire, he tried to control his universe. But the golden boy, who spent millions to isolate himself from germs, died ravaged by disease. His tragic end screams a warning to idol makers: the golden calves we create to serve us will become our slave masters. We think they will carry us through life's difficulties. Instead, we will carry them until they break our backs, hearts, and lives. If Howie could come back, he would warn us to heed well the 11<sup>th</sup> principle of the Exodus journey:

**The gods of your making weigh you down,  
but the God who made you lifts you up.**

Remember where we are as we enter the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Exodus. The Israelites are camped at the base of Mount Sinai. The LORD God has stepped out of heaven to sit atop that mountain. Nothing ever stays the same when God touches it. Sinai shakes and thunders, its top blackened by the LORD who is a consuming fire. Massively-thick clouds hide God's glory, but dazzling light still flashes through in a pyrotechnic display of sound and fury that inspires fear and awe below.

A trembling Moses slowly picks his way up that mountain until he disappears into a boiling cauldron of fiery clouds. Now the wait begins. Anxious hours turn into fretful days which drag on into weeks. Finally, they give up hope. Maybe this fearsome God has consumed Moses. You get a sense that eerie silence has descended on Sinai. Is God gone too?

The Great *I AM* has an exasperating way of showing up and then disappearing. He speaks and then is silent. His presence is palpable and then we no longer feel it. He feeds us manna in the desert only to lead us into the *Valley of the Shadow of Death*. He prospers the wicked and allows the righteous to suffer. About the time we get our doctrinal formulas down pat, he throws us a curve ball. In Romans 11:23&24, St. Paul captures the frustration of trying to solve the mystery of God:

“Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!  
Who has known the mind of the Lord?”

Contemporary theologian, Alex Burroughs cuts to the heart of idolatry: “Everyone wants God to take them just as they are; but no one wants to take God just as he is.” The Israelites decide that God is too hot to handle. They need a manageable god. They need one who is relevant to what they are facing today—a desolate string of deserts and enemy nations who will swallow them alive. They need a god tailor-made for their immediate crisis.

Beware of the subtle trap in making God and religion *relevant*. John Calvin wrote, “The most dangerous idols are the ones we form in our minds.” We are too often tempted to reshape God and his religion to attract our culture, to address to our *felt* needs, and or to conform to our tastes and traditions. Again Alex Burroughs writes,

“Modern Evangelicals in particular stumble headlong into idolatry by spending too much time examining their own personal experience, trying to make sure God belongs to them—and less time examining the Scriptures to make sure they belong to him.”

The frightened Israelites run to Moses’ brother Aaron, the high priest of Israel, with a demand in verse one, “Come, make us gods who will go before us.” How often in history have God’s people pressured their spiritual leaders to reshape theology to conform to their felt needs? Parishioners demand that their pastors preach sermons to tickle their ears, conduct worship services to please their tastes, and manufacture programs to keep them happy. And Aaron, like too many clergy, becomes a people-pleaser rather than a God-server. It leads him to compromise his high calling. God help the flock when shepherds let the sheep set the direction for the journey!

Aaron answers in verse two, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, sons, and daughters are wearing and bring them to me.” Verse four says, “He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast into the shape of a calf, fashioned with a tool.” Shame on Aaron! When the shepherd fleeces gold from the sheep in the name of advancing the Faith, watch out. When he crafts a god who will please the people, rather than a people who will please their God, he has turned true religion into idolatry. Is there a hotter place in hell than that reserved for pastors who keep their jobs by compromising God’s truth?

Later, Aaron will give the flimsiest of excuses, recorded in verse 24: “Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” That calf didn’t just pop out. Aaron carefully crafted that idol. The Hebrew should be translated *bull*. It is the diminutive form of *bull*, so it is literally “a little gold bull.” The bull was the Egyptian god of power. Bulls are strong and potent. They snort and paw the ground. When they charge, the earth shakes under their fury. They dominate the herd. What the Israelites want is a *bull* god who will go before them and strike fear in the hearts of their enemies. Pastor Aaron has given his parishioners a god who is relevant to their immediate *felt* need, and they go away happy. Isn’t that what most folks want from their church?

But why is it a *small* bull? When he finishes crafting his masterpiece, he says in verse four, “These are your gods O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt?” But he knows that this golden bull cannot carry the people on his back. Contrast this idol to what God said earlier in Exodus 19:4: “I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you up *myself*.” But not even Aaron can craft a god who can carry 3.5 million people on its back. This god will not “...go up before them...” They will have to carry it on their backs. So it can’t be too heavy. Is there anything worse than a preacher whose message is too heavy? We like our religion light, manageable, and convenient. So the bull is *small* because Aaron is a very practical pastor—the sort we all want.

What is idolatry? It is the reaction of people who don’t want to take God as he is. So they change “and God created man in his image” to “and man recreated God in his image.” When Moses first asked God his name, he replied, “I AM.” R.C. Sproul says that God is saying, “*I AM* who *I AM*, not who you want me to be, or wish I would be, or conceive me to be, or feel me to be, or make me to be.” Scotty Smith says, “An idol is anything that we look to for deliverance in the place of Jesus and his grace.” Why are the gold bulls that we make so devastating?

### 1. Idolatry swaps what is best for that which is good.

There are lots of good things in this world. But only **One** can claim the title: “The Very Best.” The first of the Ten Commandments says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Gold jewelry is a beautiful. Bulls are necessary if you want a herd of cattle. Statues can be wonderful works of art and Aaron must have been a good artist. But when the *good* becomes the object of our worship, we sold our lives cheaply for that which is less than the *Best*. St. Augustine wrote, “Idolatry is worshipping anything that ought to be used or using anything that ought to be worshipped.”

Understand this: **Golden calves don’t just jump out of fires.** Aaron lied when he offered that lame excuse. Remember the warning of John Calvin: “The most dangerous idols are the ones we form in our minds.” Idols that we craft are an extension of bad thinking. The truth is: that bull jumped out of Aaron’s mind, not the fire. Notice again what motivated the people’s desire for an idol in verse one: “As for this fellow Moses who brought us up

out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Do you see the lie? It wasn't Moses who brought them out of Egypt. Moses was just an instrument in the hand of God. Moses was great only because the presence and power of God was on him. Moses was a good pastor, certainly better than Aaron. But God wasn't dependent on Moses. It is always foolish for God's people to put their trust in their pastor or his gifts. Do you see the trap in such thinking? Once the ancient Israelites put their trust in a good man it was only a short step to putting it in a golden bull.

That's why **idolatry is the one sin, and the mother of all others.** In Romans 1:15 St. Paul writes, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of man who suppress the truth..." He goes on to tell us the truth that they suppress: God alone is our Creator, and he alone should be worshipped. Then he tells us the *one* sin that is the mother of all other sins in Romans 1:24: "They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." In short, people worship the creation and its creatures rather than the Creator. Then St. Paul goes on in the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Romans to tell us that God's wrath is revealed in that he gives us over to all manner of sins: adultery, sexual perversions, strife, deceit, murder, gossip, arrogance, *ad infinitum ad museum*. But there is only one sin that matters; that which gives birth to all the others: we chose to put our trust in created things rather than the Creator. It was that way in the beginning. Adam and Eve chose "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" to give them wisdom, pleasure, and beauty rather than the God who created the tree. Everything he created is good, and has been given to us for our enjoyment. Thank God for a leader like Moses. But when the good becomes the substitute for the One who alone is best, we have sold our lives for a poor bargain that will break our hearts in the end.

## 2. Idolatry substitutes the gifts for the giver.

Moses was a gift from God. In Ephesians 4:11 St. Paul tells us that pastors and teachers are a gift from God to equip his people. The jewelry those Israelites wore was also a gift from God. They had been poor slaves. But on their way out of Egypt, God moved the hearts of the Egyptians to give these ex-slaves gold, silver, and precious jewelry. It is ironic that the gifts of God should become the stuff of idolatry. They looked to the prophet/pastor God had given them as their Savior. They took the jewelry God had given to make them beautiful and turned it into the ugliness of a bull god. 3500 years have come and gone, yet God's people do the same today. God gives us wealth, and we turn it into the basis of our security. He gives us knowledge, and it becomes the source of our pride. He gives us spiritual gifts, and we use them to elevate ourselves in the church. He gives us wonderful traditions, and we hold on to them as if they were sacred. He gives us the gift of faith, and then we think that it was *our* faith rather than our LORD that saw us through." Or we beat ourselves up and say, "If only I would have had more faith, maybe the healing would have taken place," as if the

miracle depends on our faith rather than God himself. Listen to the words of Tullian Tchividjian, the new pastor at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church:

“We Christians are too often guilty of trusting in something smaller than God to give our lives meaning and significance: our achievements, reputation, relationships, strength, place in society, our smarts, our stuff, or our labor. To do so is idolatry.”

### **3. Idolatry sacrifices the permanent on the altar of the immediate.**

The people rushed to Aaron in panic. Look at their two concerns in verse one: “We don’t know what happened to Moses?” and “Who will lead us the rest of the way?” As the tagline of a supermarket tabloid puts it, “Inquiring minds want to know?” From the time we were two year-olds, be bugged our parents with that incessant, “Why?” Hebrews 11:1 says that “...faith is the evidence of things not seen.” But most of us live by sight, not faith. We need to see, touch, taste, and feel. Moses is gone from sight, and the God of Israel wraps himself in clouds. We ask “Why?” and our heavenly Father remains silent. We want for a sign, and he gives none. We beg him to come and he stays away. So we make an idol. It has a sense of immediacy. We can see and touch it. We reduce the mysteries of God to simple formulas. We never stop to think that a god who can fit neatly into our finite minds and is small enough to be seen by our eyes is very small indeed.

And there is that other propensity of humankind. We are always in a hurry. “We’ve waited at Mt. Sinai long enough. The clock’s ticking. Let’s move on out to the Promised Land.” But God doesn’t operate on our schedule. He is infuriatingly slow. So we jump the gun, and take the shortcut. Panic is the mother of idolatry. How many of us have sold our future by compromising ourselves in the urgency of the moment?

### **4. Idolatry exchanges the magnificent for the manageable**

The God who meets them at Mount Sinai is awesome to behold. Such majesty inspires terror. Postmodern Evangelicals have reduced God to the feel-good paternalistic grandfather who pats us on the head and says, “I hope you all have a good time today.” Contemporary theologian, Michael Horton says, “Too many preachers today have turned their Sunday morning services into caricature of the Dr. Phil Show as they present a Jesus Christ who is a therapeutic life coach rather than a Living Savior that people desperately need.” But the God at Sinai is a Living God. And Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a Living God.” He is unmanageable and unpredictable. He leads you where you don’t want to go, and demands of you that which you don’t want to do. He is never at our beck and call. He disappears when we need him most and appears again at the most inconvenient times.

But the golden bull offers a solution to this unmanageable majesty of the God who insists on being Sovereign. He is **convenient** in that we can take

him out when we need him, and store him away in a box when it suits our purposes. He is **changeable**. Because he is gold, we can melt him down again and make him to become whatever we need him to be when a new set of circumstances arise. He can be a bird, snake, lion, or crucifix. He becomes a god for all seasons. He is **portable**. We don't have to wait on him. If we want to leave Mt. Sinai, we can just hoist the bull up on poles and carry him out ahead of us. If we want to stop anywhere along the way, we can just put him down on the altar we build. But a god small enough to be manageable is unequal to the job when a really big crisis arises. Then only an infinitely wise, strong, merciful, and holy God will do. Howard Hughes found out that all the money in the world couldn't build a bubble that would keep out the tiniest germs, or stop the tide of disease that ravaged his body. We can't have it both ways: either we will have a majestic God who is unmanageable or manageable gods that are not majestic.

### **5. Idolatry degrades us into the image of the gods we make.**

God made man, male and female, in his image. We are best when we are like him, and we are most like him when we worship him. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:18, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory..." There is an inviolate principle of life: we become like the God or gods that we worship. Look at what happens when they begin to worship that bull. Verse 25 says, "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." When you worship a bull you become like a bull. The Hebrew words used to describe their actions speak of debauchery. Bulls are beasts of unbridled passions, and so were these idolaters. Bulls live to eat, procreate, and fight. And that's what the Israelites were doing. As our culture turns increasingly away from the God of the Bible, we ought not to be surprised at the level of depravity, debauchery and deception that spreads across the land. The idols we create always destroy our dignity. In the end Howard Hughes became a bag-o-bones perforated with hypodermic needles. Life is full of warnings about the danger of idolatry.

So how do we respond to this message? Moses tore into Aaron, and then he tore the idol down. He ground it into powder, and then mixed it with water and made the people drink it. It was bitter medicine to swallow. It is never pleasant to swallow the truth. But thank God, Jesus took a bitter cup and swallowed it. The cup of God's wrath against us was poured out on him. He drank fully of the cup of our idolatries. It was bitter like gall. The poison of our sins killed our Savior. But in his death, burial and resurrection brought us salvation and healing. There is forgiveness, even for idolatry. But we must crush the idols in our lives. Not one of them can remain. The journey to the Promise Land is too long for us to carry idols that not only can't get us there, but will wear us down in the desert. Instead, let the LORD pick you up and carry you all the way home.