



THE STORY OF *Everything*

LUKE 24:27

Before they were famous, they were simply ordinary people pursuing their dreams. Consider Justin Bieber. Born at St. Joseph's Hospital in London, Justin grew up with his single mother in Stratford. Raised in low-income housing and supported by his mother's parents, Justin was discovered by an agent in 2007 after seeing a video that Justin's mom had posted on YouTube of her son performing a hit song.

While the boy from low-income housing suddenly became a household name, Bieber suddenly found himself in all sorts of trouble. Vandalism, reckless driving, and finally a driving under the influence of alcohol charge sullied his reputation, leading many Americans to call for his deportation back to Canada in 2014.

The minute a person becomes a celebrity is the same minute they become a monster, said one writer (Cynthia Heimel, quoted by Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 2). Once pleasant people, suddenly wealth, success, and fame changes them so that their anger and wrath is terrifying. It is as though the thing they longed for the most reveals what is truly deep in your heart. Celebrity after celebrity seems to have their lives ruined – they want the lights on them, the roaring crowds, the cameras flashing, the adoring fans. But the minute the show is over, the lights are off, they find that the money, fame, and success hasn't satisfied.

Idols are like that. They hold out the promise of what you want and what you need, but they never fully deliver. They may give you a taste of what you want, but they don't satisfy the deep hungers of your soul. Idols, you see, are merely gods who appeal to our selfish desire.

In Exodus 32, Israel comes face to face with who they really are. They have been out in the wilderness to find freedom. Moses has been up the mountain for 40 days. And Israel's heart is now exposed. The heart wants what the heart wants. And they're going to get it.

Idolatry is more than the worship of a little statue; idolatry is the pursuit of anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God with the hope that it will give you what only God can give. And this theme is an important one for us to understand so that our hearts might worship rightly and be lead to the presence of God.

Worship Rightly – It will Shape You (Exodus 32)

Moses had been up the mountain 40 days (24:18), and already Israel was directly contradicting one of God's most clear instructions that they had agreed to follow. They had heard the voice of the Lord in the thunder and trumpets. But 40 days is a long time to obey apparently.

So the people turned to Aaron, looking for gods to worship. Aaron said he would lead them in a festival unto the LORD (v. 5). Having made a golden calf from the jewelry of the people, the people got up the next day and off came the clothes and out came the drinks (v. 6).

Moses was up the mountain, downloading the tablets from the cloud. There, in God's presence, the Lord told him to go back down to break up the party. So he goes down. He sees what is happening – the commands of God have been broken. Taking the covenant, Moses smashes the tablets to pieces (v. 19) just like the covenant has been broken, and he asks his brother what happens. Aaron, in his sanitized leadership, says, "I told them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and *out came this calf*" (v. 24).



THE STORY OF Everything

LUKE 24:27

The soul is shaped in worship. What you revere you will resemble. God had told Israel to worship him alone, not any other god or image, because he was seeking to form Israel his son into his image. But Israel's worship of the calf had shaped them – not into the image of their Father but in the image of the calf. When the Lord told Moses what the people were doing (32:8-10), they are described as having turned aside quickly out of the way (v.8) and being stiff-necked (v. 9). And when Moses comes down the mountain, he stands at the gate, trying to gather the people (v. 26) because Aaron had let them loose. Israel isn't acting like the son of God; Israel is acting like rebellious cows running around wild and needing to be regathered. Hosea will use the same language later in the Bible story, adding that idolatrous Israel is like a stubborn heifer (Hos. 4:16-17). This is probably the reason Moses grinds up the gold calf and makes the people drink it. It is though he is saying, "You want to worship the gold calf? You want this idol to get into you and shape your life? Then let it get into you!" (v. 20).

So Moses gathers the people and calls them to return. The vast majority do. But those who do not are struck down. We might wonder why this act of violence. The Old Testament picture is that God's people must not let the sons of the serpent grow in their assembly. So Moses does what Adam didn't do – he has the sons of the serpent removed from the son of God.

What you rejoice in you will resemble. Either you'll be shaped into the image of the Father or the image of the serpent. You'll either be remade, or you will be ruined. The war of worship isn't about the style of music you sing but the allegiance your heart makes. So worship rightly!

Repent and Trust – It will lead you to back to God (Exodus 32-34; Leviticus 9)

Because of Israel's idol worship, God had told Moses, "Let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you" (32:10). It could have been a tempting offer to Moses – he would receive all of the promises of Abraham and be blessed. But Moses does not take this as flattery; he implores the Lord not to start over because the Lord's name would be blasphemed among the Egyptians (v. 12) for appearing to break his promise to Abraham (v. 13). And God relents.

As Moses goes back to the people and calls the wild cattle back to the gate (vv. 25-26). Moses knows that if he doesn't eliminate sin among God's people, God's people will be eliminated. He calls the people to return, and those who do not are struck down (vv. 27-28).

But it is not enough to just say "I'm sorry." Moses tells the people in v. 30 that because of their great sin, he will go up to the Lord and make atonement for sin.

So Moses goes up to the Lord, where he is told that God will keep his promise – he will give them a land – but his presence won't go with them. And when the people hear this word, they are deeply grieved (33:4). They see that the presence of God is not dwelling among them (33:7-11), and there is little hope for them unless God goes with them.

What Moses does now is quite remarkable: he pleads to the Lord from the tent of meeting (33:12-23). He begs God to go with them. He asks how they can find favour again in the sight of the Lord (33:13). Israel has broken covenant. What will God do?

Moses is trusting in God's promises. He's depending that God will keep his word to Abraham – to bless his people, to make them a great nation, and to give them a land. But these blessings are worthless unless the Lord's presence is with them.



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LUKE 24:27

And in a great act of mercy, the Lord takes Moses to a split in the rock out on Mount Sinai and shows him all of his goodness – he is a God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (34:6-7). In other words, Israel may break the covenant, but deep in God’s heart is grace and mercy, steadfast love and forgiveness, and he will keep his covenantal promises. He will forgive. He will be gracious. Moses prays, “If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us...and pardon our iniquity and our sin” (34:9). So whenever Moses would meet with God, his face would shine (Exod. 34:29-35) because he had been in the presence of God. God would still dwell among his people, but Moses would have to cover his face to protect Israel from the glory of the Lord that would consume them. In other words, the covering over Moses’ face was an act of mercy (it kept sinful Israel from being consumed by the glory of the Lord) and judgment (because Israel’s heart was hard).

What follows in Exodus are often seen as tedious reports about how the craftsmen made everything for the tabernacle: the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altar, the priestly garments. They followed the commands from Exod. 25-30 with great precision, so that in Exod. 39:32 we hear, “Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished, and the people of Israel did according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses; so they did.” The threat of God’s presence not going with them terrified them.

What is needed is repentance – turning from the selfishness of idols who offer to satisfy you with temporary pleasures and returning whole heartedly to the Lord. Everything that Israel does from Exodus 35 onward is so that they may offer a sacrifice of atonement for their sin and that God would go with them. They must repent. They must turn from their wicked ways and follow God’s commands. And they must depend on the sacrifice that will atone for their sin, which is presented in Leviticus 9. And when it is presented, we are told that “This is the thing that the Lord commanded you to do, that the glory of the Lord may appear to you” (Lev. 9:6). So Aaron offered the sacrifice for himself and for the people, as he had been commanded (Lev. 9:7).

See the glory of Christ

But Israel’s problem was that they repeatedly fell away. They wanted the blessings of God but needed the transforming presence of God. Worshipping God, seeing his glory, is a transforming presence and power. But Israel was separated from the transforming glory of the Lord. They could not look on the glory of the Lord reflected in Moses’ face (Exod. 34:31). The glory that was intended to show them mercy and goodness, patience and grace, love and forgiveness was not seen by Israel, and the result was that Israel never knew the rest that God had promised.

This is Paul’s point in 2 Cor. 3:7-4:6. Moses’ face was covered, and the transforming glory of the Lord never changed Israel from being stiff-necked, wandering like cattle on the loose. Israel had been shaped by their idol worship.

But Jesus came, and in his face we see the glory of the Lord. And when Jesus comes, God speaks a creative word of grace: “Let their be light!” and there is light in our hearts, showing us the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And what is the glory of the Lord?

It is a sacrifice that is offered up for us, showing us that the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquities. When you stare into that glory, it transforms a heart. When you see that your idols are not satisfying, you can either continue to pursue happiness and rest and peace apart from God, or you can turn to him and find



THE STORY OF *Everything*

LUKE 24:27

the rest that your soul so earnestly craves. You can be shaped by the gods of success, family, pleasure, and comfort, becoming a person who is irritated, angry, bitter, and selfish, or you can turn to the Lord. Worship shapes us. Worship the wrong thing, and it will make you stiff-necked and loose. Or we can worship the Lord, being set free (where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty 2 Cor. 3:17).

Christ has come near to us – the very presence of God. And his presence will either melt a heart of stone or harden the heart. So we must stare deep into the goodness and graciousness of the Lord, and let him transform us. When we gaze deep into his forgiving, restoring, healing work at the cross, we will be changed from one degree of glory to another.

But if someone hears the gospel and doesn't change, the problem isn't with the gospel. The problem is with the human heart (2 Cor. 4:4-6). We don't need to adjust the message of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:2-3). We need to stare into it more deeply, being transformed, and pray that God will lift the veil that covers people's hearts from seeing the light that shines in the face of Jesus Christ.

The cure to our idols is to gaze deeply into the beauty of Jesus Christ. For what would happen if you stopped, looked, and gazed in wonder at the God who made the most glorious snowflakes, the most perfect sunset, the most exquisite fall leaves, the most pristine lake, and the most spectacular flower? What would happen if you looked and saw your sins upon his shoulders, your shame upon his head, your sorrow carried on his back, and his love looking right back at you? Would you be filled with wonder at a glory that isn't just out there, but offered to you?