



Foreign Faith | When We Lead Ourselves

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Speaker: Matt Summers

Wow. All right. Well, Good Morning, Menlo Church. It is so good to be with you today. Whether you're watching online or in person right now here at Menlo Park or at Saratoga, San Mateo, or my old stomping ground, the Mountain View campus, love you, miss you. Wherever you're tuning in from, we're so glad you're taking some time with us today.

Welcome to week two of a four-week series titled Foreign Faith. For our time in the series, we're going to be looking at the stories contained in the Exodus narrative in the scriptures, which if you've never heard of that before, if this is news to you, I'm now assigning you homework. That is to watch either *The Ten Commandments*, circa 1956 starring Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner, or for a more contemporary telling of these stories with maybe the best soundtrack ever released for a family film, *The Prince of Egypt*, released in 1998. Now these are, of

course, dramatizations of what actually transpired, but there is a profound meaning to be derived from the experience of being in exile.

In fact, we've titled this series intentionally to evoke a sense of unfamiliarity within us. Maybe you've been in a place or a space where you felt like you didn't fit in. Can you remember what that feels like to be the new kid in school, to move to a new neighborhood, to be a stranger in a strange place? Maybe for you that's right now because it's been a long time since you set foot in church.

And if that's you today, I want you to know that you're especially welcome here because I believe that wherever there is uneasiness or uncertainty or unpredictability, there is also work being done within us that is worth acknowledging. And whether you are a person of deep belief or you sit on the fringes of faith, I think we can all agree that life is not as linear as we'd like it to be. We're subject to a lot of ups and downs. Things will likely only go our way for a few chapters at a time, if we're lucky.

And in the midst of those trying times, we might have to make some defining decisions for our future. I know that I have. And if you haven't yet, I promise your day is coming. And in moments like that, I'm plagued by this question: What do you do when you don't know what to do?

And if that isn't enough to worry about, the wisdom literature of Proverbs gives us this warning, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12)

Well, great. I've come to realize that my own insecurities will rise in the midst of uncertainty, and it will call everything I know or believe into question, including my faith. But I also hold fast to the belief that there is an author in my story.

That each chapter of life is worth a second look. And that even when you don't know what to do, I can still have faith in the one who does. To quote Pastor Phil from last week, "When you feel stuck, God is just getting started." So before we go any further, I'm going to pray because I know that there are some of us today who feel like foreigners in our own existence as we contend with the uneasiness of who we are, what we're called to do, and how our faith factors into that. Will you pray with me?

God, thank you for a beautiful morning, and thank you for the opportunity to hear from you. And I pray for each and every one of us to be open to the idea, not just to hear from you, but open to the idea of how you might move and lead and guide our lives. May we listen intently to you, in Jesus name. Amen.

One of the perils of being a pastor is that the moment people find out what I do, it changes the dynamic of what should just be an ordinary casual conversation. Sometimes that means people are now more cautious about what they might say towards me, or sometimes they're more suspicious of what I might say to them. But often when I talk to people who don't ascribe to a particular faith tradition, they might say that they are, and help me with this, spiritual but not religious.

It's a familiar phrase meant to signal an openness to faith without the obligation of it. But as the conversation unfolds, something fascinating really tends to happen. We inevitably will start talking about their life or purpose or career, family, ambition, identity, anxiety or hope. People will share what matters to them most and what they're willing to sacrifice to get it. And in that moment, I'm struck by this idea.

I don't actually think that people are spiritual but not religious. If anything, humanity is religious but not spiritual. Religion isn't limited to liturgy or rituals. Religion at its core is what we give ourselves to with regularity and reverence.

It's what we build our lives around. It's what shapes our values and demands our loyalty. And in that sense, we're all religious. Some of us worship productivity. Some are devoted to image or achievement or relationships, status, control. Our

calendars and bank statements, those are actually living pieces of liturgy. We practice our disciplines. We evangelize our preferences. We tithe our time and attention. We build altars to our own heroes.

We exist in the most secularized era of human history since the age of enlightenment. And yet, we're still surrounded by cultural and civil expressions of religion. And if you're seeing what I'm seeing, maybe it's time to ask if we're missing something. Maybe we're actually wired for worship. Maybe there's a spiritual component to our identity. And the more we try to deny it, the more we rely on our own religions to supplement it.

Scripture defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). So what are you hoping for? What remains unseen in your life? And maybe more importantly, who are you becoming while you wait?

There is a correlation between our identity, how we view ourselves, and our idolatry, what we worship. And last week, we concluded our time together by questioning the cultural gods in our lives, busyness, success, or status. And today, we're looking at one of the most infamous idolatrous identity crisis moments of Israel's history, the story of the golden calf.

It's a cautionary tale of religion without spirit, worship without waiting, and leadership without lordship. Because when we forget who we are, we forget whose we are. So to set the scene, Moses has now led the Israelites out of their captivity in Egypt under Pharaoh. They've survived slavery. They've lived through plagues. They've crossed the Red Sea. They've witnessed miraculous provision, but they are now exiles from their former land and nomadic, wandering daily through the wilderness as foreigners with the hope of an eventual promised land. But with the exhaustion of each passing day, that reality feels like a distant dream.

And slowly but surely, they're forgetting who they are. And to make matters more complicated, Moses, their leader, is unavailable at the moment. God has called him atop a mountain for what they can only assume is divine upper management training. So, they've temporarily made camp in the shadow of Mount Sinai. More than a month has gone by and now some in the camp of the Israelites are starting to question what they're doing, who they are, where they're going, and even what they've left behind, and it's here that everyone is about to learn a powerful lesson. If we don't make peace with our past, it will define our present.

I have personally had to contend with this before. Before entering into full-time ministry, I had formal training as a first responder and I worked in a clinical setting at a level one trauma center. From the time I was 20, overnights, I was very

busy. There were a lot of things that I did and that I saw that I couldn't psychologically or emotionally metabolize in those moments because I needed to keep my wits about me.

And then fast forward to my first years in full-time ministry, getting married, starting a family. This pattern began to emerge in my behavior where I would present to others as emotionally unavailable or indifferent or unconcerned about normal everyday things. And what I came to discover about myself was that because I had spent years in a setting where life and death would hang in the balance daily, nothing seemed nearly as urgent or important.

And transitioning out of that routine was like trying to return to a civilian lifestyle. There was an internal fatigue inside of me that went unaddressed for years because I didn't make peace with my past. It was affecting the present. It still does. So, because I know what it's like to experience this firsthand, it makes this story all the more relevant. Let's take a look at the text together.

"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this, Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'" (Exodus 32:1)

So, a crowd of destructors get together. They corner Aaron, the brother of Moses, and they tell him what they want him to do. You know, I'm reminded of my own childhood in this moment.

Actually, if you grew up in a household with two parents, then likely your household consisted of two different parental temperaments, one who likes to enforce the rules and one who likes to bend the rules. And in the absence of Moses, the people turn to the more pliable leader. And poor Aaron, he wasn't appointed to make decisions like this. This is way above his pay grade, but he gets dragged into it. I think we've all had times in our lives where we've been battlefield promoted at home or at work or volunteering in ministry. And I think before we judge Aaron too harshly, we can probably all point back to moments in our lives where we didn't show up perfectly either.

But thankfully, our poor decisions are not immortalized in the pages of scripture because what Aaron is about to do, whether by fear or peer pressure or just plain ineptitude, is the dumbest thing possible. He's going to give the people exactly what they want. "He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool." Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." So the next day, the people rose up early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward, they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry" (Exodus 32:4-6). If you are surprised by how quickly the people seem to give up on God, as if their freedom or their miracles or the provision that they'd seen meant nothing, what's important to consider is the power that their past still had on them.

Generations of Israelites had spent their entire existence in the shadow of the Egyptian Empire, surrounded by wealth and power and a pantheon of gods and idols in that culture. The gods of Egypt weren't optional. They were embedded in everything. the Nile, the sky, the harvest, the pharaohs.

The Israelites weren't just slaves in their service. They were slaves in their subconscious. It wasn't just what they did. It was who they were. Their former land gave them an identity. It was a sad, miserable way to live, full of violence and grief and tragedy. But it was something. It was familiar.

And in the absence of an identity, they turned to idolatry because their past was informing their present. They didn't want the spirit. They wanted religion. They

didn't want mystery. They wanted something they could manage. Now, the text doesn't tell us that they rejected God outright. They just can't see him. They don't renounce Moses' leadership. They just don't know where he is. And in their impatience, they turn to invention so they can lead themselves.

They tell Aaron, "Make us gods who will go before us." The Hebrew language here implies urgency. It's almost a demand. It's not curiosity. It's desperation. And Aaron's fatal error here wasn't just that he gave into the demands of the people. It's that he tried to merge the mythology of the Egyptian gods with the God of Israel.

This is known as syncretism. It's an attempt to amalgamate conflicting beliefs so they can coexist. It's not total disbelief. It's just a blending of it to make it more manageable.

And when we look at it that way, this begs the question, are we so different? The names of our gods may have changed, but their demands haven't. We still crave something we can touch and manage and predict. We still want our process to look like progress. We still bow to whatever gives us a sense of control. Now, we don't make physical idols, but we mold them out of overloaded calendars that make no room for rest or Sabbath. Careers that become our entire identity.

Relationships that validate our worth, goals that keep us grinding, images that keep us curated but shallow.

We're actually seeing a modern expression of syncretism right now here in Silicon Valley where we adopt the truth and the beauty of a Christian community, but we adapt it to fit our own model of personal success. Now, look, if you're just trying things out, if you're figuring yourself out on the journey towards faith, that's great. I'm all about VCs for JC. I think we could use more of that. But not when we've traded the golden rule of how to treat others for the golden calf of how to treat ourselves.

We usually don't outright reject God. We just merge him into our religion. Little bit of Jesus, a little bit of hustle, little bit of scripture, a little bit of self-help, little bit of surrender with a whole lot of strategy. And in the moments where God feels silent to us, we don't sit still. We move out of anxiety or ambition. We build idols out of our insecurities just enough to feel spiritual, not enough to be surrendered.

And that's what happened in the shadow of Mount Sinai. The people were so fixated on the religion of progress, they missed the presence of the spirit because they had never made peace with their past. They had forgotten who they were. What about you? What's in your past that's defining the present?

I ask this because like Israel, if left unacknowledged, we'll end up worshipping what once enslaved us and we'll call it freedom, forgetting who we are and whose we are.

This past spring, I took my first ever trip to Las Vegas with some childhood friends. We're all former musicians and we went to go see the living remnant of the Grateful Dead at the Sphere. Big incredible music venue. Now, I know that there's a lot of negative connotation about Vegas, but I can assure you all of us are in our 40s. We have sleep apnea. We have chronic back pain.

So, the only trouble we wanted to get into was how to find a cheeseburger at 2 a.m., which I must say Vegas is uniquely suited to provide. But what was shocking to me was the disorientation while walking through the casinos. The lights, the noise, the action. It never turns off. It's just constant movement and stimulation. All designed to pull you in. And I kept telling myself, Matt, you know better than this. The house always wins. Go spend your money on a cheeseburger. You'll be happier. And yet, I found myself wanting to participate, not because I was planning to, but because I was surrounded by it. I was immersed in it.

In his book, *Atomic Habits*, author James Clear talks about how dopamine is released not in the experience of pleasure, but in the anticipation of it. Meaning, if you're gambling, you're probably experiencing a dopamine surge just by placing a bet. You don't need to win the jackpot. You just need to pull the lever so that even when you lose, and you will lose, you've still been neurochemically rewarded, which reinforces the behavior regardless of the outcome. It's why certain activities are so addicting.

To simply resist the problem isn't enough to make a new habit. You have to reduce your exposure to the experience that triggers it. We have to pay attention to what we're around because what we're around will take our attention. The danger of idolatry isn't an ancient problem. It's a human habit. Idolatry thrives in desire without direction.

And it is a pattern that happens so frequently in the pages of scripture that more than a thousand years after the Exodus story in a letter to developing churches in the Roman Empire, the Apostle Paul draws on the experiences. And he describes it this way. "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him nor gave him thanks, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles." (Romans 1:21-23)

What James Clear is describing in the brain in his book, Paul is describing in the soul. It's what happens when we stay in spaces mentally and emotionally and spiritually that trigger our desires without checking our direction. And the word that stands out to me the most in this text is exchange.

They didn't just reject God. They traded him. They knew him. They'd seen him move, but they stopped glorifying him. They stopped giving thanks. And in that vacuum, when God no longer held their attention, they started searching for something that would. And they made an exchange. God's presence for human progress. God's image for something they could shape. God's voice for something they could control. And here's the thing, the they that Paul speaks of in this passage, these were not irreligious people.

These were people of faith. They were spiritual. They were moral. They were intelligent. They were me and they were you. And Paul says, "although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." This is a warning written to us. You don't need to renounce what you believe. You just need to replace it. And when that takes root in our soul, it makes us less of what we were meant to be. So we spend time day trading our desires, hoping we'll get some direction from it. And we don't even notice the loss until it's too late.

And that's why Paul follows up this teaching in Romans with a more personal warning written to a church in a city not so different from Vegas. Corinth was busy and wealthy and spiritually confused and culturally overstimulated. And here's what he says. "Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were as it was written the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." (1 Corinthians 10:6-7)

So Paul is quoting their behavior from Exodus 32 word for word and he's saying pay attention to the pattern. Stop rewarding yourself for replacing God. This was not written to make us look down on ancient primitive people. This was written to help us not become them.

Our habits are not neutral. Our attention is not neutral. Our worship is not neutral. And this is where Paul's words and Israel's actions converge. Because when we exchange something sacred for something shallow, we don't just break a rule, we start becoming something else. Our idols don't just sit on a shelf. They shape our souls. They show up in how we think, in how we treat people, in what we fear, in what we chase, in what we become.

So that's why this next part of the story gets so intense because it's no longer just about what Israel built. It's about what they become. And Moses returning from the mountain sees it with his own eyes. So what happens next is the result of our replacement and the consequence of our crisis, our identity crisis. So to set the scene, Moses has been on the mountain for 40 days convening with God, receiving direction on how to lead and protect the people. He's given instructions on how to build a place of worship and commandments inscribed on stone tablets to keep the people safe and give them laws and ensure a sustainable future for them.

The first law being a warning specifically against idolatry and an assurance from God that a covenant will be established and that God will lead his people. God was not preoccupied. He was preparing the people for what they truly needed in order to thrive. A healthy vision of worship and lordship. And it would seem just as they're wrapping up, God tells Moses, "You better get back down to your people. There is corruption in the camp." If you're a parent, you've heard this tone from someone else telling you, "Hey, your kids are acting up." And God and Moses share this very human moment.

God is grieved. Moses is shocked. And both of them are heartbroken for what's about to happen. Moses descends the mountain, tablets in hand. He hears the singing. He sees the people worshipping, partying, and then he sees the golden

calf. And Moses loses it. I think every dad has had this moment before.

Something that activates the lowgrade burning rage that sits dormant inside you until you witness something that just unravels you.

Now, Moses is many things. He is a prophet. He's a leader. He's a deliverer. But he's also a pathological hothead. He has a temper. And for him, this moment crosses a line. I can imagine the people frozen in fear, watching Moses crashing out. He throws the tablets down, breaking them, not because they're useless, but because the covenant has already been broken. He takes the idol, he incinerates it, grinds it into a powder, and scatters it over water, and makes the people drink it. It's a symbolic and physical reaction to make people taste what idolatry will cost them. And then in one of the most sobering moments in the Old Testament, this happens.

"Then Moses stood at the gate of the camp and said, 'Who's on the Lord's side? Come to me.' And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, 'Thus says the Lord God of Israel, put your sword on your side, each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.' And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about 3,000 men of the people fell. And Moses said, 'Today you've been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost

of his son and his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.'" (Exodus 32:26-29)

So Moses assembles an army and tells men to take up swords and exacts violence and judgment, and by the end of it, 3,000 men are dead. This is hard to read. I wish this ended differently because it doesn't square well with my thought and my hope of a loving God. I wish there was a further explanation, but we don't have that. You know, we just finished a series called Inspired and Uncomfortable that addressed moments like this in the Bible.

And I loved what Javon said, reminding us to not allow a caricature of God to keep us from the character of God. And in my own process of wrestling with the realities of the written word, I've come to recognize that I don't have the authority to edit the text. But I do have a responsibility to understand the context. And that's why it's important that we look at this and learn this together. First, this wasn't random violence.

This wasn't even about vengeance. This was a spiritual internal civil war that turned to the physical. It was a decisive tragic response to a communitywide spiritual collapse. And when a whole community loses its center or when the bottom falls out, it takes something drastic to restore it. This was a moment of

crisis, not just for Israel, but for their own future. Because without a response, the idolatry would have become normalized. The golden calf wouldn't have just been a one-time mistake. It would have been a model, a prototype for self-made religion. And the fallout wouldn't just be spiritual, it would be generational.

This wasn't just a moment of failure. It was a result of the people forgetting who they were. and whose they were. When idolatry goes unchecked, it doesn't just change what we worship, it redefines us. Idolatry alters our identity. And in a world full of noise and images and distractions and blended beliefs, God isn't asking us to pick up a sword, but he is asking us to pick a side. He's with us, but he's saying, "Are you still with me?" Not just when it's easy, but when you're surrounded by opportunities to compromise.

Sometimes the most dangerous idols aren't the ones we worship publicly. They're the ones we tolerate quietly. They grow in the shadows. They wrap themselves around our habits or our routines or our success.

And over time, they start to define us. They alter our identity. And this raises real questions for us. What have I tolerated for too long? What am I protecting that God might be calling me to release? What have I traded that needs to be

returned? And when I look at this story, I'm left asking this question. Do we have the courage to put to death what threatens us?

Sometimes it looks like quietly walking away from the altar that you've built. Other times it means smashing it and never going back. Because if we don't draw the line, we'll blur it. And if we don't confront what's deforming us, we'll find ourselves defending it.

If I have one takeaway from the Exodus narrative, it's this. Don't rush what God might be doing in your life. Some things take time. Don't try to merge incompatible ideologies. Don't trade your peace for progress because you'll never make it to the promised land without going through the wilderness first.

So, let's ask a few questions this morning. Not to shame, but to consider, but to guide. What are the idols of your insecurities? Is it status, control, safety, image, something else? Where are you molding your own meaning? Because I'm here to tell you, you were meant for more than that.

Where have you prioritized your own leadership, your own intuition over lordship? Where is your desire overruling your direction? What is your motive behind your movement? Because in the spirit, surrender is strength.

And lastly, who are you becoming in your waiting? Because God is leading you. Are you moving because you're afraid to be still? Your waiting isn't wasted. It's shaping you.

I don't know what idol you've built. Maybe it looks like a habit that you can't break, a story that you keep telling yourself, or a version of God that you will never be comforted by, or a version of God that will never confront you. Whatever it is, it can't hold you. It can't heal you because it didn't make you.

Thankfully, this is not the end of the story. Much later, on another mountain, a better mediator would come to us. Not carrying down tablets and rules, but carrying up a cross. Where Moses descended to demand judgment, Jesus would descend to absorb it. Where 3,000 died at Sinai, 3,000 would be saved at Pentecost. That's not just good storytelling. That's the good news.

At Sinai, the law revealed our failure, at the cross. Grace redeemed it. So yes, this part of the story is hard, but it sets the stage for the most beautiful part of it. God doesn't leave his people stuck in their failure. He steps in. He makes a way. He offers a better exchange because God isn't out to correct our behavior. He wants to restore our identity.

The bad news is we can't lead ourselves. The good news is we don't have to. The gospel is not that we finally got our act together. It's that Jesus came down into the mess we made. He didn't cancel us. He didn't scold us. He didn't leave us to lead ourselves. He came to remind us who we are and whose we are. To resist our own religions, to smash the idols of our insecurities so we can be reconciled back to our creator.

God isn't out to embarrass you. He's out to rebuild you. He doesn't rub failure in your face. He calls you by name. And that's why these stories matter because reordering our worship is how we recover our identity and recover who we are.

And that's why we gather in places like this week after week on Sundays not to perfect ourselves but to pursue the presence of God to remind one another that we're not alone in the wilderness. And that when even our faith feels foreign, even

when we feel stuck or ashamed or lost, God is still near. Because when you forget who you are, he hasn't.

So, as we prepare to receive communion together, I want to remind you that this table that we come to, it isn't just a tradition. It actually marks a turning point. And it reaches all the way back to the night of the Exodus where God instructed the enslaved Israelites to prepare a sacred meal. Not because they had earned their freedom, but because they were about to receive it as a gift.

That night marked their deliverance. Not because they were perfect, but because they were protected. God was making a way. And centuries later, Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room to celebrate that same Passover meal. But this time he reframed it not as a story of freedom from slavery, but of freedom from shame and sin and striving.

And he took the bread and he said to them, "This is my body broken for you."

And he looked at the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant, God's promise to you to make you whole again."

So today, as we receive the bread and the cup, we are stepping into that story. Not just remembering a meal, but we're reordering our worship, returning to the one who calls us by name, reminding ourselves that even when we've built the wrong thing, he still offers us a better one. The table reminds us who we are. The table helps us make peace with our past. The table is not for those chasing religion, but for those seeking the spirit. And that is why we come to the table. Not because we got it right, but because we know we didn't, and we trust in the one who did.

This is the table of return, of realignment, of restoration. So come not as a finished product, but as a beloved child. Come not to lead, but to be led. Come and receive what only Jesus can offer. a better exchange, a better identity, a better hope. Come and be free.


Will you pray with me? God, I thank you for the reminders, these stories that are contained in the biblical narratives and how we can still derive incredible wisdom and leading in them. And so, I ask for each and every one of us, God, that we would respond in accordance. Help us to walk away or smash the idols in our lives built out of insecurity. Help us to remember who we are and whose we are. Help us to be restored back to you even if we don't feel it. Help us to understand it. Give us divine wisdom and love and kindness for ourselves and understanding for you. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Books and Articles

- **Sacred Fire** by Ronald Rolheiser
<https://a.co/d/dChJWKJ>
- **Building a Non-Anxious Life** by John Delony
<https://a.co/d/fKwECyk>
- **Atomic Habits** by James Clear
<https://a.co/d/a8Q9SD4>
- **Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering** by Timothy Keller
<https://www.amazon.com/Walking-God-Through-Pain-Suffering/dp/0525952454>
- **The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry** by John Mark Comer
<https://a.co/d/bPYceKN>
- **NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible**
<https://a.co/d/aNQG6Fv>
- **NIV First Century Study Bible**
<https://a.co/d/f8qbAm0>
- **Harper Collins Bible Commentary**
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Online Resources (Videos and Podcasts)

- The Bible Project: Exodus Overview
<https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-exodus>
- John Mark Comer Podcast: Fight Hustle, End Hurry (with Jefferson Bethke)
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/fight-hustle-end-hurry/id1480300467>
- Rebecca McLaughlin: How Christianity Makes Sense of Suffering (Video)
 How Could A Loving God Allow Us To Suffer? Rebecca Mclaughlin- HOME...