

The Golden Calf Idol

Exodus 32

Exodus 32 - *"Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for 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.'"* ² And Aaron said to them, *"Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."* ³ So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf.

Then they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"

⁵ So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, *"Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord."* ⁶ Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

⁷ And the Lord said to Moses, *"Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. "* ⁸ *They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"* ⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, *"I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! "* ¹⁰ *Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may ^[c]consume them. And I will make of you a great nation."*

¹¹ Then Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, and said: *"Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? "* ¹² *Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. "* ¹³ *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" "* ¹⁴ So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people. ¹⁵ And Moses turned and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the Testimony were in his hand. The tablets were written on both sides; on the one side and on the other they were written. ¹⁶ Now the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, *"There is a noise of war in the camp."* ¹⁸ But he said: *"It is not the noise of the shout of victory, Nor the noise of the cry of defeat, But the sound of singing I hear."*

¹⁹ So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing. So Moses' anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ Then he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it. ²¹ And Moses said to Aaron, *"What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?"*

²² So Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. ²³ For they said to me, ‘Make us gods that shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ ²⁴ And I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out.”

²⁵ Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies), ²⁶ then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, “Whoever is on the Lord’s side—come to me!” And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. ²⁷ And he said to them, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’” ²⁸ So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. ²⁹ Then Moses said, “Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother.”

³⁰ Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” ³¹ Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! ³² Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.”

³³ And the Lord said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. ³⁴ Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin.” ³⁵ So the Lord plagued the people because of what they did with the calf which Aaron made.”

Background Notes

At the end of Exodus 31, it looked like everything was on track, everything was ready to go, and the green light of progress was on. But now comes chapter 32. How could the people turn away from the Lord to idolatry so quickly? How could Aaron be so weak-willed, that he could be persuaded by the people to make a golden calf idol? This act was a direct violation of the Second Commandment in Exodus 20:4-5 – “*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to worship them...*” The covenant with God was broken. No wonder Moses smashed the tablets of stone that contained the Ten Commandments!

Doctrinal Points

1. The incident of the golden calf exposed the idolatry and immorality of the people.

The idolatry of the heathen nations surrounding Israel was always associated with immorality, such as fertility rites and religious prostitution. Notice in Romans 1 how idolatry and immorality are closely associated in God’s description of the

sins of the pagan Gentile nations. Romans 1:22-24 – *“Although they claimed to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.”* Read on through the end of Romans 1 to see the association between idolatry and immorality.

Here in Exodus 32 God’s people became like the pagan nations in their idolatry and immorality. In verse 6 we see that the people *“sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”* The word *play* here does not mean play softball or ultimate Frisbee. No, it means sexual “play.” So, God’s people became involved in a sexual and lascivious orgy, as they went wild and danced around the golden calf.

2. The incident of the golden calf exhibited the intercession and wrath of Moses.

How do you like Aaron’s excuse? *“They gave me the gold; I threw it in the fire, and presto, out came this calf! I mean, what could I do, Moses? It’s not my fault.”* Notice that Aaron placed the blame for his actions on the people – but that’s not what verses 2-4 say about how the golden calf came into existence! And Deuteronomy 9 tells us that Moses had to intercede for Aaron, as well as for the people of Israel.

In verse 10 we see that God was ready to remove the whole rebellious nation, but Moses interceded for the people. Moses’ intercession for the people was based on three considerations:

1 - They were God’s chosen people (v11)

2 - What would the Egyptians now say about the God of Israel (v12)?

3 - The promises of the Abrahamic Covenant (v13).

Moses’ intercession with God for the people, while he was on the mountain of God, is a beautiful spiritual picture of our Lord Jesus, who is now on high making intercession with the Father for us (Hebrews 7:25). God listened to the prayer of Moses and changed His mind about removing the nation. Verse 14: *“So the Lord relented and did not bring upon His people the disaster He had threatened.”*

God “changed His mind” or God “relented” -- what does this mean? From the human perspective, God changed His mind. This is not a contradiction to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. So God does answer prayer.

The wrath of Moses was exhibited (v15-20), when he came down from the mountain and saw the people running wild and worshiping the golden calf. Moses shattered the two tablets of stone, an action that certainly symbolized the broken covenant. Moses then smashed the golden calf, ground it into powder, threw the powder into the brook and made the people drink it! This not only got rid of the calf, but the gold as well! This action was certainly symbolic of the fact that we

will reap the bitter results of what we sow (Galatians 6:7-8). The incident of the golden calf exhibited the intercession and wrath of Moses.

3. The incident of the golden calf exacted the discipline and judgment of God.

Such willful and idolatrous rebellion and immorality called for – indeed demanded -- the discipline and judgment of God. God's discipline and judgment was carried out by sword (v27) and by plague (v35). The tribe of Levi stood by Moses and used the sword to kill all those who were still out of control and willfully involved in the idolatry and immorality, and about 3,000 men were killed. More of the people died by plague (v35).

Such discipline and judgment by God is not pleasant to read about, but it emphasizes God's righteousness and holiness. The doctrine of hell, for example, is not a pleasant doctrine, but by it the righteousness of God is upheld. God's "book" (v 32-33) is not the same as the "Book of Life" mentioned in the book of Revelation. No, the Book of Life in Revelation has to do with *eternal* life. This book in Exodus 32 has to do with *physical* life, and many of the people of Israel were blotted out of that book as they lost their lives under God's judgment. The incident of the golden calf exacted the discipline and judgment of God.

Practical Application

Use your gold for the glory of God!

Where did the gold for the golden calf come from? It came from the gold earrings that the people of Israel brought with them out of Egypt. Where did the gold for the construction of the Tabernacle come from? That also came from the articles of gold that the people brought out of Egypt.

Some of the gold of Egypt went into the Tabernacle and was used for the glory of God, and some of the gold of Egypt went into the golden calf and was used for idolatry, which took away from the glory of God.

Do you see the obvious practical application? Where is your "gold of Egypt" going? In Scripture, Egypt is often a spiritual picture of the world system, with its values and attitudes. As believers, we can take the gold of this world and use it for the glory of God. On the other hand, we can take the gold of this world and use it for self-glory. Self-glory is essentially idolatry, because it certainly puts "self" before God in our lives.

What are **you** doing with your "gold of Egypt"? Use your gold for the glory of God!