

August 23rd, 2020

The Golden Calf

Exodus 32 - NASB

BIBLE IN A YEAR READING PLAN

Aug 16 Jeremiah 14-17	Aug 20 Jeremiah 30-31
Aug 17 Jeremiah 18-22	Aug 21 Jeremiah 32-34
Aug 18 Jeremiah 23-25	Aug 22 Jeremiah 35-37
Aug 19 Jeremiah 26-29	Aug 23 Jeremiah 38-41

Lesson Idea: We are called to worship the One True God and only Him. If we fail in that, we need to plead for His mercy and repent from our idolatry.

Foundational Truths:

- God alone is worthy of worship.
- We should not allow anything besides Him to become an object of worship.
- Acts of worship that are misdirected or self-centered are sinful and unacceptable to God.
- Leaders are accountable for how they lead others.
- God punishes wickedness.
- We should intercede for others in prayer.

Background:

In our lesson last week, we looked at the giving of the Ten Commandments. The first two commandments speak specifically against what happens in chapter 32.

Exodus 20:2-6

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens above, on the earth beneath, or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on their children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing loving devotion to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Later in the chapter, God reiterates:

Exodus 20:23

You are not to make any gods to rival Me; you are not to make for yourselves gods of silver or gold.

In Exodus 24, Moses and Joshua set out for the top of Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord and receive more of His commands. He left these instructions with Aaron and Hur:

Exodus 24:13-18

13 So Moses set out with Joshua his attendant and went up on the mountain of God. 14 And he said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we return to you. Aaron and Hur

are here with you. Whoever has a dispute can go to them." 15 When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, 16 and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered it, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. 17 And the sight of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop in the eyes of the Israelites. 18 Moses entered the cloud as he went up on the mountain, and he remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

In today's lesson from Exodus 32, the people violate the true worship of God by sacrificing to a golden calf. There was no excuse for the people to so quickly break the first two commandments and make a graven image to serve as a replacement for Almighty God; although Moses' prolonged absence from the people while on Mt. Sinai serves as the background for this grievous error. According to the [*Pulpit Commentary*](#):

During the absence of Moses in Mount Sinai, an absence of nearly six weeks, the Israelites grew impatient, and regarding their leader as lost to them, and the Divine Presence which they had hitherto enjoyed as lost with him, insisted on having a symbol of that presence made for them, which should henceforth go in front of the host and so lead them on in their journeyings. It would seem that the pillar of the cloud, which had gone before them from Succoth to Sinai, was now removed from the camp, and resting upon the "mount" where Moses was ([Exodus 24:15](#)). Under these circumstances they wanted a visible tangible something, in which they could regard the Divine Presence as resting, and whereto they might offer worship and sacrifice (ver. 8).

Exodus 32:1-6 Wicked Worship

Questions about the Text:

- **V 1. What reason did the people give for wanting Aaron to "make a god?" Why do people so easily trade in the true and living God for idols?**
- **V 2-4. What did Aaron do with their request?**
- **V 5-6. What was the "purpose" of their gathering? What was the result of it?**
- **What makes worship acceptable or unacceptable before the Lord?**

Notes:

When the cloud of God's presence enveloped the mountain that their leader had ascended, the people expressed their concern that they didn't know what had

happened to Moses. Apparently they were afraid that Moses had taken Yahweh with him, because they demanded of Aaron to make for them a physical representation of the god they were following. Rather than trusting that the God who had miraculously and powerfully rescued them from Egypt would not forsake them, they reverted back to the type of idolatry that was prevalent in Egypt.

Application: Many times people would rather have something they can see and hold, instead of trusting that the invisible God is holding them. They would rather have a god they can form in their own desires than humble themselves to the Lordship of a God that they cannot control. Of course, idol (and idle) worship is ultimately disastrous, because only the Living God is worthy of worship.

Aaron gave into their demands and fashioned a golden calf out of their earrings. Verse 4 emphasizes how much work he put into it, as he melted the gold down and used a graving tool to fashion it. That is hot and hard work and probably took quite some time to finish. (Compare that to what Aaron told Moses about how the calf came about in verse 24: *I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.*)

Upon finishing the calf, Aaron built an altar for it and declared the next day to be a feast day **"to the LORD"** (v 5). The name LORD is actually the covenant name for the true and living God, YAHWEH. Either Aaron thought the calf would be a good representation of God, or he tried to persuade the people that the feast should honor Yahweh. Either way, his attempt at worship was misguided and led the people into further sin, because *"the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play"* (v 6). Several Bible versions translate *"to play"* by saying they rose up *"to indulge in pagan revelry"* (NIV, NLT, Berean). The CEV expresses it frankly with: *"Then everyone ate and drank so much that they began to carry on like wild people."*

Paul warns the church to pay attention to this incident in 1 Corinthians 10:5-7:

5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

6 Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.

7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play."

It wasn't because of the volume of their celebration or because they feasted (many of the God-ordained sacrifices and holy days were followed by feasting and featured loud, celebratory music and calls to joy; see Exodus 18:12; 24:5, 11, and Psalm 100). Their feast featured the wrong focus of

worship, for it had a people-centered purpose instead of being God-centered.

Application: If we are not careful our worship can fall short in the same ways. We can approach God like He is supposed to serve us or demand that the style of worship always meets our preferences and likes. We might be going through the motions of worship (v 6: they offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings), but our hearts are set more towards our enjoyments or feeding our desires. God will address these same issues years later through the prophet Amos (chapter 5:21-27):

21 "I hate, I reject your festivals,

Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 "Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

23 "Take away from Me the noise of your songs;

I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

24 "But let justice roll down like waters

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

25 "Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel? ²⁶You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves. ²⁷Therefore, I will make you go into exile beyond Damascus," says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.

Exodus 32:7-14 Pleading with God

Questions about the Text:

- **V 7. How did God refer to the people? Why?**
- **V 8-9. How many different sins were the people guilty of committing?**
- **V 10. What did God say He would do to the people?**
- **V 11. Why did Moses ask this question? And what does Moses say about the people?**
- **V 12-13. What reasons does Moses give to try to persuade God to not destroy His people?**
- **V 14. What did God decide?**

Notes:

In verse 7, God tells Moses that *"your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted*

themselves.” God does not claim the people as His own, because obviously their hearts were far from Him. In verses 8-9 God catalogues their sins: *8 They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’* *9 The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people.’*

In verse 10 God says that He will destroy them and make a new nation out of Moses’ descendants. But Moses shows the heart of a good and selfless leader by interceding for the people. In verses 11-13 Moses refocuses the discussion about whose people they were. In verse 7 God had said they were Moses’ people, but in verse 11 Moses says that they were God’s people, which God Himself brought up from Egypt with His powerful and mighty hand. Moses then pointed out the negative witness the destruction of Israel would have on the Egyptians who had witnessed God’s deliverance of them. Moses also asked God to remember the covenant promises He had made through Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Moses implored God to *“Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people.”* (v 12) Moses’ prayer was all based on maintaining respect for the glory of the Lord; none of it defended any goodness in the people. His prayer was focused on the purposes of God, as Jesus would later teach His disciples to pray for *“God’s Kingdom to come and His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven”* (Matthew 6:10).

Verse 14 simply states: *“So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.”* Some translations say: *The Lord relented from the disaster...* (ESV, see also NIV); or *“The Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do unto His people”* (KJV, see also ASV, Darby, and Young’s Literal Translation). This verse has caused various questions to be raised, but some truths are obvious in the broader context of Scripture.

- When a passage says *“God repented...”* or *“changed His mind...”* we must remember that human language is often incomplete. There are passages like Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29 which make the bold truth claim that *“God is not a man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”* (NASB) God is omniscient, so He knows exactly what He is going to do and not do, before He ever speaks a word. He is also omnipotent, so He has the power to accomplish whatever He purposes.
- God’s warnings of impending judgment often come with an implied option of grace if repentance follows it. Thus, God’s plan may include either wrath or mercy, and He will be glorified either way. His will is to glorify

Himself and receive glory from men, and He can do that through blessing the righteous and/or by punishing the wicked. In Jeremiah 18, God gives the illustration of the Potter and the clay and says: *“5 Then the word of the Lord came to me. 6 He said, ‘Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?’ declares the Lord. ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. 7 If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, 8 and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. 9 And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, 10 and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.*

- The translation that *“God changed His mind”* seems misleading. To repent or relent means to go the opposite direction from where one had been going—in this case God announced His plan for wrath but went with the flip-side of that same plan, which was mercy brought on by the intercessory repentance of Moses. That was not a change of mind, but a change of action because of the humility and entreaty of Moses.
- Intercessory prayer is powerful. Some view life as fatalistic—that God has already decided what is going to happen every second of every day and there is no changing it. But throughout the Bible, God’s Word states the importance of prayer and indicates that our prayers are precious to God and can help with the outcome of the daily spiritual warfare (see 2 Chronicles 7:14; Matthew 7:7-8; Mark 11:24; Luke 18:1ff; Hebrews 4:15-16; James 5:16; 1 John 5:14-15; etc.)
- At least one other lesson that should be seen here—Moses’ prayer of intercession is credited with saving the nation. This serves as a direct foreshadowing of the intercessory nature of the work that Jesus Christ would do thirteen centuries later to provide forgiveness for mankind.

Psalm 106:19-23 describes the golden calf incident and Moses’ intercession in this way:

*19 They made a calf in Horeb
And worshiped a molten image.
20 Thus they exchanged their glory
For the image of an ox that eats grass.
21 They forgot God their Savior,
Who had done great things in Egypt,
22 Wonders in the land of Ham
And awesome things by the Red Sea.
23 Therefore He said that He would destroy them,
Had not Moses His chosen one stood in the breach
before Him, To turn away His wrath from destroying them.*

Exodus 32:15-35 The Consequences of Sin

Questions about the Text:

- **V 15-16. What was unique about the tablets of the testimony?**
- **V 17-18. What did Joshua and Moses hear from the camp?**
- **V 19-20. Why did Moses' anger burn? What did he do and why?**
- **V 21-25. Why did Moses hold Aaron accountable? How did Aaron fail to accept the responsibility?**
- **V 26-29. Why did Moses call for a show of support? How did the sons of Levi respond?**
- **V 30. What did Moses accuse the people of doing? What did Moses agree to do for the people?**
- **V 31-32. How did Moses intercede for the people?**
- **V 33-35. How did God respond to Moses' intercession? What does this teach about the righteousness of the Lord?**

Notes:

The "tablets of the testimony" that Moses received on the mountain were engraved by God on both sides. This implies both the perfection and completeness of God's Law. The festival (not "worship") that Joshua and Moses heard was so loud and unruly that it sounded like a war was going on. Moses burned with anger because of how quickly the people had turned to idolatry and sensual celebration over spiritual consecration. In his anger, Moses destroyed the special tablets written by God and obliterated the golden calf. Any "god" which can be ground into a powder and ingested with water is not a god at all!

Moses' anger also burned against Aaron. He held Aaron accountable for bringing "*such great sin*" upon the people. Aaron blamed the people and their proclivity towards evil, but lied about how the calf just miraculously came out of the fire (see vs 4 and the work implied in fashioning the calf)! Leaders are called to righteousness no matter what others are demanding. Aaron failed to accept his responsibility in allowing the situation to get out of hand, but Moses held him accountable.

In vs 26-29 the people were still out of control, and their behavior had become or would become "*a derision among their enemies.*" To protect the purity of God's people and the reputation of God, Moses called for those who were "*for the Lord*" to join him in purging the instigators of evil

from their midst. The sons of Levi joined him and executed 3,000 men that day. The slaughter finally brought the uncontrolled rioting back into order.

The next day, Moses confronted the people with their "*great sin*" but agreed to go back up the mountain to intercede for them. Moses' earlier intercession was done without knowledge of the extent of their sin (vs 11-13). His prayer was based on the calling, character, and purposes of God. This time Moses confesses the full extent of Israel's sin, and entreated for the mercy of God. Moses acknowledged that God would be justified and righteous to not forgive them; but in an act of selflessness, asks to join the people in their punishment if God decided to blot them out "*from Your book You have written.*" (The Apostle Paul expressed the same kind of selfless prayer in Romans 9:2-3 when he says that he would wish himself to be "*cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people...*" Do we have that type of selfless love and concern for those who are lost around us?)

In vs 33 God revealed that He judges the sinfulness of a person's heart as an individual. Even though the nation would suffer from His punishment of sin, one's eternal destiny is dependent on a personal relationship with Him—Only He knows what is in a man's heart, and He's the only one who can write or blot out a name in His book (see also Revelation 20:11-15).

Applications

- ✓ **How attentive are you to the precious and perfect Word of God?**
- ✓ **Do you accept the accountability for your own sins and confess them before the Lord?**
- ✓ **Do you care enough about others to intercede for them and be willing to even lay down your life?**
- ✓ **Has God written your name in His book? If so, how are you seeking to bring Him glory in your worship and your life?**

Lesson by Bro Stan