

The Golden Calf

Exodus 32:1-14

Moses had forty phenomenal days and nights on the mountaintop. While God was making tablets engraved with His holy law, Aaron was making a corrupting graven image. This is the tragic fall in Exodus and a warning given to the New Testament church.

NOTES

Overview of the Text

When the people don't see Moses coming down the mountain, they quickly gang up (*qahal*) on Aaron to fashion a god (v1). They distance themselves from "this Moses" who is not to be found anywhere except right up Sinai, interceding for them. They initiate the idolatry, but Aaron gives in immediately, instructing them hand over their golden earrings (v2). Earrings are a sign of submission (Ex. 21:6), and later the Ishmaelite men will give their earrings so Gideon can make his idolatrous golden ephod (Jdgs. 8:25-27). Aaron likely makes the calf out of wood and then covers it with gold (v4). He proclaims "This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt", builds an altar before it, and plans a feast to Yahweh the next day (v5). The idolatry is shocking, but subtler than it might appear at first. Israel is not asking for a pantheon, but rather for a visible representation of Yahweh. They offer ascension and peace offerings, sit down to drink and rise up to play (v6). "To play" is the same word in Genesis 26:8 where king Abimelech saw Isaac "sporting" with Rebekah such that he knew she was his wife (cf. Gen. 39:14, 17). The Lord tells Moses to go down the mountain to "your" people who have turned away and worshiped the calf (vv7-8). They are stiff-necked and He intends to unleash His anger and make a new nation out of Moses (vv9-10). But Moses pleads to Yahweh not to destroy the people because He brought them out of Egypt. The Egyptians will then slander God, plus He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to multiply their descendants and give them the land (vv11-13). The Lord relents of what He would have done and Moses is ready to go down and throw down (v14).

Walking by Sight

Israel just made a covenant with God (Ex. 24:1-8). They are left alone at the bottom of the mountain for just a few weeks before plunging into sin. The same thing happens in the garden after God makes a covenant with Adam, steps away, and then they fall (Gen. 3:8-9). There is a good kind of independence, without pride and self-reliance, that trusts the Lord when He is "absent" by remembering and holding fast to His means of grace. We have to walk by faith such that our relationship with God is not ultimately dependent on parents, spouse, siblings, tradition, zip code, social connection or time Moses has been up on the mountain. This applies now as much as then: "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). The calf was wicked but plausible: "O Yahweh of hosts, God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim" (Is. 37:16) The Lord is enthroned on these angelic, winged bulls. Hathor was a major Egyptian goddess and consort of Ra, but it's more likely that Israel wants a visual representation of Yahweh and not another god. The tabernacle is full of visual things, including the cherubim whose wings cover the ark, but worshippers are forbidden from bowing down: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them" (Ex. 20:4-5). There is something in us that is inclined to worship images and rationalize it just as Israel did: "The Lord has cherubim in the most holy place, so what's wrong with having a calf out here?"; "God hears us everywhere, so why can't we use this

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image, icon, or statue to focus our attention and revere Him?” Most importantly, because He said so. We have to start where He does. God plainly forbids it because He is jealous (20:5). This means that what at first violates the second commandment also breaks the first commandment when the image receives honor that is due to God alone (cf. 1 Kgs. 12:26-33). Pictures can remind us of loved ones, but as soon we adore it, something is seriously wrong. Pictures of Jesus are not strictly forbidden to make, but we don’t know what He looks like and ought to be very careful. Loyalty to God allows you to know in the dark what you did in the light. This is the meaning of faith.

Degrading Idolatry

Idols don’t ever contradict you. Because they can’t speak, see, hear, smell, touch, move or grunt, the devotee is left to himself (Ps. 115:3-8). After the psalmist makes this point, he exhorts everyone to trust God: “O Israel, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield” (Ps. 115:9-11). Because second-commandment idolatry is unhitched from the word of God, it gets ugly fast. The people “corrupted” themselves (v7). The apostle Paul quotes verse six: “Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play’” (1 Cor. 10:8-9). Almost no one who bows to images thinks a deity fundamentally resides within the physical object. The corruption is not primary intellectual, at least not at first. It begins in the heart, desiring to get away from God and His law, and to get to Him this way. What starts with “theological differences” turns out to be the mind justifying what the heart desires. There was a good time to be had at the golden calf. Idolatry degrades God, and therefore man. But honoring the word of God exalts Him and dignifies us.

Pleading with God

This is Israel’s categorical rejection of God. They are a stiff-necked people, meaning they willfully, repeatedly, and egregiously reject Him (v9). He still plans to save the world, and but He could do with a new nation through Moses (v10). Doesn’t a fresh start sound good? Moses knows Israel is wicked, but God called him to love and lead her, so he argues for mercy with reasons which God Himself has given. First, Yahweh is the one who delivered them (v11). Was this only to wipe them out? Second, He said He would get glory over Pharaoh and his army such that they would know He is Yahweh—the savior and not the destroyer of Israel (v12; 14:4). And third, Moses calls on Him to remember what He said to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the oath He swore by Himself to multiply their descendants (v13; Gen. 22:16-18). Moses is the meekest man on earth, but his bold prayer saves his people (Num. 12:3; Deut. 9:20). It could have gone another way. Is this the zeal that we have for our people—for our family, for the church, for our nation and the world? Jesus, the greater Moses, prayed that if there was any other way than His death to save us, to do it that way: “nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39).