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Lesson 9
The Golden Calf Incident
Exodus 32:1-29

In this lesson we will study one of the greatest, if not the greatest, national sin Israel ever committed. The people made a golden calf and worshiped Jehovah-God through it. To see the hideousness of this sin, we must put this incident in the context of Israel's history. God supernaturally delivered Israel out of Egypt and supernaturally took her people across the Red Sea and also supernaturally took care of them by providing food and water in the desert for two whole months. The Israelites, whenever they were tested, mumbled, grumbled, griped, and groaned, never exercising faith in God. God should have destroyed them or at least disciplined them severely. Yet, God was patient with this infant nation and always dealt with the Israelites in grace. God promised to take them to the land of Canaan where they would become a great nation.

The nation of Israel, through the wilderness wanderings, came to Mount Sinai where God graciously gave her the Mosaic Law. God made a covenant with Israel and promised the nation great blessings if the people would obey God's Law (Exodus 19:5-6). The Israelites promised to keep all the words God gave them in the Law (Exodus 19:8; 24:3, 7). God was present on Mount Sinai, and there were thundering and lightning and all kinds of supernatural phenomena to indicate His presence. From the mountain, God spoke orally and wrote the commandments with His own finger to the whole nation the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). This was a direct message from God. The first two commandments concerned Israel's relationship to God. God said, ***"You shall have no other gods before Me,"*** and, ***"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."*** Four times God warned the Jews against idolatry (Exodus 20:23; 23:23-24; 23:32-33) because the Jews tended toward idolatry, and God hates all kinds of idolatry.

God called Moses up to the mountain so as to give him in written form not only the Ten Commandments but also all the specs for the Tabernacle. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and nights getting the information recorded for us in Exodus 25-31. Joshua went part way up the mountain, and Moses went into the presence of God. Moses left Aaron and Hur in charge of the camp in his absence. (Exodus 24:12-18).

IDOLATRY OF ISRAEL — Exodus 32:1-6

"Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron, and said to him, 'Come make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'" Moses had been separated from the children of Israel for almost six weeks. They had seen Moses pass into the cloud hovering over the mountain where there was lightening, fire and thundering. Perhaps the people thought Moses had been devoured by the fire. Whatever, they grew impatient. They wanted action. They wanted something to happen, so they took the situation into their own hands. These fickle Jews had forgotten all that God had done for them the last three months.

It is so common for Christians to grow impatient, take matters into their own hands, and

do a carnal act. All acts of the flesh are devastating and produce nothing but misery in the long run.

In a period of less than forty days, Israel's desires had shifted from the proper worship of Jehovah to a degraded form of idolatry. They wanted a visible representation of God. They did not cast away the concept of Jehovah, but they wanted to worship Jehovah through a golden calf, which they could feel and see so as to arouse their natural senses. This calf was undoubtedly the Egyptian god Apis, who, under the form of a calf represented the powers of nature. The Jews had been well acquainted with the worship of Apis, which was a stronghold in and around the Land of Goshen where the Jews had been in captivity for four hundred years. When the pressure was on and they had no leader, they turned to idolatry rather than the true God. They gave way to their fears and went back to a type of paganism, even though God had specifically forbidden them to be involved with any kind of idolatry. These Jews did not want to forsake Jehovah but serve Him under the symbol of Apis. Their great sin consisted of not realizing the real presence of the unseen God, while their fears of unbelief led them back to familiar idolatrous practices, being oblivious to the fact that this was a breach of the first two commandments.

Christian, when the pressure is on, do you turn to God or to your old, cunning and carnal unsaved ways to solve the problem? Do you fall back into worldly solutions or seek biblical ones?

Moses was gone. They must have another leader, and they wanted Aaron. They also had to see the god they worshiped, and they wanted this golden beast to lead them to the Promised Land. When Moses was gone, the children of Israel showed their true attitude of heart and cast over all restraints. Think of it, while Moses was receiving the holy Law, these rebels cast off their allegiance to Jehovah, the ever-present, sovereign God. The Jews had forgotten all the miracles God had done for them in three months since they came out of Egypt, but they did not forget the idols of Egypt.

When a Christian is free from all external restraint, then it will be shown where his heart is. A Christian away from church, away from parents, away from husband or wife or children, or away from Christian friends will show by his actions what he really believes in his heart.

“And Aaron said to them, ‘Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’” Aaron was a sneaky, mouse of a man. Aaron did not rebuke the people or say one word against the idolatrous act. This was the ideal time for Aaron to stand up and be counted for Jehovah, but instead, he told the people to take their golden earrings and give them to him. Some commentators have tried to defend Aaron by saying he put this challenge before the people hoping they would not respond when they saw how expensive this act of idolatry would be. By this action, he hoped to waylay this idolatrous practice. However, there is no evidence in the context for this. Why did Aaron encourage this sin? Aaron saw that the people ***“assembled about Aaron”*** (Exodus 32:1). They wanted him to be their leader instead of Moses. Aaron was power hungry. He wanted to rule, but he did not have the personality or natural gifts to rule as did Moses. Aaron was a compromiser, a man pleaser, so that he could come to power.

Probably the people went to Aaron instead of Hur because they knew Aaron was a weak leader and would sell his allegiance to Jehovah in order to become the leader over all Israel.

“Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears, and brought them

to Aaron.” The people gladly made whatever sacrifices were necessary to follow this idol.

This shows us what great sacrifices true Christians are often willing to make when they are out of fellowship with God. Sacrifices in the energy of the flesh can often be greater than sacrifice for the Lord Jesus Christ. Often great sacrifices are made by some to cover up their own rotten hearts toward God, but they do this to appear spiritual before men. We must remember that when we do human good in the flesh apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot please God.

“And he took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten calf; and they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’” Aaron must have been a marvelous sculptor. He probably first made a wooden mold, then poured gold over it. After the gold had hardened, he took the graving tool and fashioned this marvelous idol, which was a thing of great beauty.

“Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.’” Aaron then made an altar for this idol. This was not an abolishing of worship of Jehovah, but it was a mixture of paganism with the worship of Jehovah (syncretism). It is just unthinkable that Aaron would do such a thing, but he did.

A Christian out of fellowship, even a Christian leader, is capable of doing every conceivable, hideous sin. The lust for power and control over people can drive a Christian to do stupid things.

“So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” Aaron called a “feast to the Lord” (Jehovah). Jehovah was to be worshipped through the golden calf. The golden calf became an aid to worship. They felt they could worship Jehovah better if they had a visible representation of God, which would allow them to worship by sight rather than by faith. “. . . ***For we walk by faith, not by sight. . .***” (2 Cor. 5:7). This was a religious, pagan feast, common in Egypt, and it follows a certain pattern. All heathen festivals centered around a god represented by an idol. There were then religious rites. Then came the feasting and drinking of alcohol so that people got totally plastered. Then came the sexual debauchery, which was hedonism at its best. The Jews made an idol of the golden calf, gave offerings to this idol in ritual worship, banqueted royally, drank uncontrollably, and “rose up to play.” The Hebrew translation of “rose up to play” is “fornicated.” The word suggests immoral sexual activity, which normally accompanied fertility rites found among the Canaanites who worshipped the god Baal. This was a great orgy. Possibly as many as a million Jews participated in this paganism, although we cannot be sure that every Jew without exception participated, or if they did participate, we do not know to what degree. We do know that multiple thousands did participate, and the whole nation was guilty for letting it happen. What a ghastly sight! Loud noise, wild dancing, nudity, men chasing women, and people fornicating all over the desert in plain sight. All this was done in the name of Jehovah.

When men and women get away from God, they act worse than animals. They display their depravity without any sense of restraint, and this rebellion shows up in a partying spirit and sexual perversion of all kinds.

Christian, we may not be guilty of physical idolatry and fornication, but are we guilty of spiritual idolatry and fornication? Do we follow the idol of materialism and justify this action by somehow using the name of God? Do we do the same thing with the idol of power, pride and

pleasure? Do we rise up to play in a spiritual sense? Christians are to keep themselves from all kinds of idols, physical, spiritual, and mental. **“Little children, guard yourselves from idols”** (1 John 5:21).

INFURIATION OF GOD - Exodus 32:7-14

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, ‘Go down at once for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 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 from the land of Egypt?’” While Moses was in deep fellowship with God, God told him of the idolatry and that he was to go down to the people. They were “corrupted”, which means “to go to ruin.” These Jews had literally “gone to pot.” Their sin, their corruption, their turning from revealed truth, and their shunning divinely ordained leadership amounted to apostasy.

Notice that God refers to the Jews as **“Your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt”** rather than “God’s people.” Why? This reflects God’s anger at the Jews at this point in time. God was actually disclaiming the people of Israel. They had broken the covenant. They had forfeited all rights to blessing from God.

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold they are an obstinate people. Now let me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them ...’” The Jews were a stiff-necked, stubborn, obstinate people who refused to be led by Moses or God. God was so angry with these Jews He was ready to destroy every last one of them, and would have done so had not Moses right then begun to intercede for the people. When God said to Moses, **“Now let me alone,”** He must have had reference to Moses’ prayers, which at that point began to be offered up for Israel.

“...And I will make you a great nation.” -- God was willing to destroy Israel and start all over with another nation from the loins of Moses. This was a great test to Moses to find out to what degree he was committed to the covenant God had made with Israel. This was a severe test. He had to choose between his own glory and honor and the well being of the people whom God had put under his care. Moses was a man of God, and he chose for God, for the covenant, and for God’s people rather than being a progenitor of a great nation. Moses was not weak like Aaron. He was a man of deep conviction with unwavering loyalty to Jehovah-God and His covenants.

“Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, ‘O LORD, why doth Thine anger burn against Thy people whom Thou has brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?’” In prayer, Moses reminded God that the Jews are His people, not Moses’, and that He had dealt with them in grace from the beginning. Everything the Jews had to this point was not due to any good in them but only to the unadulterated grace of God. Israel was God’s property by divine grace, and now they needed more grace, not wrath, from God.

“Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from Thy burning anger and change Thy mind about doing harm to Thy people.” Moses reminded God that God’s glory was at stake. If God destroyed Israel, the Egyptians and their gods would triumph and declare that Jehovah-God could not handle His own people. They would conclude that instead of God leading Israel into the desert to sacrifice that He led them to be sacrificed. To destroy the Israelites would bring great reproach on God’s name. Moses was concerned for God’s glory in his prayer life.

“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants to whom Thou didst swear by Thyself, and didst say to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” Moses appealed to God’s faithfulness. He had promised in the Abrahamic Covenant to give the land to Israel. Moses held God to His word. God must be true to His own word or He would be a liar.

Moses knew that the Jews were guilty and did not have a leg to stand on. They should have been destroyed. Moses’ plea was not based on Israel’s worthiness, for she had none, but on God’s character.

Christian, do you remind God of His grace in your prayers? Do you appeal to His glory and the honor of His name? Do you hold God to His promises found in the Bible? Try this approach, and it will revolutionize your prayer life.

“So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.” Moses’ prayer somehow got God to change His mind.

When the Bible speaks of God changing His mind (repenting), it is employing a figure of speech in language we can understand. As far as Moses was concerned, God seemingly changed His mind. This statement simply expresses in human terms the fact that God answered Moses’ prayer. Let us always remember that our prayers can somehow change God’s mind from our perspective.

MOSES IRATE — Exodus 32:15-20

“Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the others. And the tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing engraved on the tablets.” Moses put the two tablets of stone under his arm, which included the Ten Commandments and the specs on the Tabernacle, and went down the mountain.

“Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, ‘There is a sound of war in the camp.’” Joshua was a little naive for he thought a war was going on in the camp of Israel, but it was revelry from the orgy. Joshua would have never said this if the noise was not deafening.

“But he said, ‘It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, nor the sound of the cry of defeat; but the sound of singing I hear.’ And it came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses’ anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hand and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.” While God had told Moses about this orgy, Moses probably thought the whole thing could not be that bad. When he saw for himself the riotous multitude and the licentious merriment, he became very angry. His indignation was stirred beyond control when this abomination was before his eyes. God’s anger had been appeased by Moses’ prayer, but now Moses shows righteous indignation concerning this sin. His anger found expression in the smashing of the tablets. This act was appropriate and symbolic in light of the broken covenant between God and Israel.

Christian, do you have a holy indignation when you see sin in your own life or in the

lives of others? There must be a holy hatred of sin in your life if there is to be true conformity to Jesus Christ.

“And he took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water, and made the sons of Israel drink of it.” By burning the idol, the wooden mold was destroyed and the gold was melted down. Then it was ground into fine powder and strewn upon a brook, which flowed from Mount Sinai. The people were then made to drink of it. This was a symbolic act in that the people were to swallow their own sin, identifying with it so as to pay the consequences of it.

INQUISITION OF AARON - Exodus 32:21-24

“Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘What did this people do to you, that you have brought such great sin upon them?’” Moses was a good leader and tried to find out the facts from Aaron who had been one of the leaders in charge of the camp. Moses did not go off half-cocked and put Aaron to death before he had all the facts. Apparently this was a public rebuke of Aaron. Moses blamed Aaron for letting the people get into this shameful act of idol worship. Aaron’s answer to Moses is incredible.

“And Aaron said, ‘Do not let the anger of my lord burn; you know the people yourself, that they are prone to evil.’” Aaron immediately shifted the blame from himself to the sinful tendencies of the children of Israel. He dodged responsibility.

“For they said to me, ‘Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ And I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, let them tear it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”- Aaron also was willing to lie to Moses about how this golden calf was made. Aaron was such a weak individual he would do anything, even lie, to save face. Why did he do this? He wanted to take Moses’ place as leader and was willing to make all kinds of concessions to get his desired end. Aaron was a man pleaser and not a servant of God. Because he did sin, he had to cover it up with lies. God should have destroyed Aaron on the spot, but God did not because Moses was praying for Aaron. ***“And the LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I also prayed for Aaron at the same time”*** (Deut. 9:20).

No Christian will ever be effective for God as long as he is a man pleaser and has all kinds of evil motivations, which bring glory to self rather than glory to God.

INFLICTION OF PUNISHMENT ON OFFENDERS - Exodus 32:25-29

“Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control--for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies . . .” The words “out of control” may mean “loosening” or “uncovering,” referring either to lack of control or nakedness. What Moses saw was the debauchery and revelry of the people even after he commanded them to drink the gold in the stream. Apparently, many of the people were still out of control and rioting. They refused to repent because they loved their sin.

“...Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said ‘Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!’ And all the Sons of Levi gathered together to him.” Moses, at this point, made a challenge to the whole nation. This was a challenge to separation and godliness. It was to follow the God of the covenant. They were to turn from idols and wanton living to serve the true God. Right at this point, every Israelite had to make a decision. Where there is apostasy, there can be

no neutrality. They could repent and follow Jehovah and His leader Moses, or they could go on in rebellion and suffer the consequences. Apparently one of the first groups to get on the Lord's side was the Levites.

Every person must settle the issue, "Am I on the Lord's side?" There can be no neutrality when serving God. One is either on God's side or the Devil's side. One is either serving God or sin.

"Now therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:14-15).

"And Elijah came near to all the people and said, 'How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.' But the people did not answer him a word" (1 Kings 18:21).

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon (riches)" (Matt. 6:24).

Christians must always separate from apostasy.

"Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord, "and do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:17-18).

"And he said to them, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor." So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day." The Levites went out to kill those among the children of Israel who refused to repent and get on the Lord's side. This was not an indiscriminate massacre. Amnesty had been offered to all in the challenge, ***"Who is on the Lord's side?"*** Those killed were rebels who resisted God and Moses and went right on in their licentious, riotous living. Rebels to God's laws and ways will always receive judgment.

"For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.' And again, 'THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:26—31).

"Then Moses said, 'Dedicate yourselves today to the LORD--for every man has been

against his son and against his brother—in order that He may bestow blessing upon you today.’ Moses pleaded with the Jews to dedicate themselves to the Lord. Yes, they had sinned grievously, but there was blessing if they would dedicate themselves to God.

Christian, if you want God to bless you in your life, you must dedicate yourself to God. You must unashamedly get on God’s side.

“I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:1-2).

CONCLUSION

One of the basic truths of Scripture is that God judges men for their sin in both time and eternity. We have seen how God judged His own people so harshly because of idolatry and all of their licentious practices. God’s wrath burns hot against sin. If God’s punishment is so severe against the sin of His people, how much greater judgment will fall upon those who are not His people? Theirs will be the greater judgment in the eternal abyss. ***“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”*** (1 Peter 4:17)

This section of Scripture also teaches that God forgives His own people for all sins they do even though they will have to pay the historical consequences of that sin. If God forgives His own for sin when He has sent His Son Jesus Christ to die for them, how much more willing is God to save a person who is not yet His child? God will save you if you turn to Christ, for He is a God of love, compassion and mercy who takes delight in saving and giving new life to all who turn to Christ. Have you turned to Christ and received Him as your Savior and Lord?