

The Whole Story of the Golden Calf. Exodus 32:1-33:17



Everyone remembers the story of the Golden Calf either from Sunday School or Saturday cartoons. Moses had stayed up on the mountain for forty days and the people thought he wasn't coming back, so they built a statue of a calf as his replacement. But then Moses comes down the mountain carrying the two tablets on which God had personally carved the Ten Commandments and he gets so mad at the people's sin that he smashes the tablets. That is about as far as most Sunday school lessons or sermons go: as a warning against making for ourselves other idols to replace God.

However, if you read this story more closely, as we are going to do today, yes you will find a lesson against making idols, but more importantly there are also lessons about

- why in spite of our rebelliousness God still wants to live in communion with us
- and how one person living in a right relationship with God can sometimes save an entire nation from a disaster of its own making.

So if you have your own Bibles please turn to Exodus 32, or take out a pew Bible and turn to page 78, because today we are actually – together – going to closely read through the whole story of the golden calf, to learn all the problems that were going on with the children of Israel and also to notice how, **not once but three times Moses talked God into changing His mind** about destroying or abandoning the children of Abraham.

This coming Tuesday during our Something More Bible study, we will look more deeply into this rather confusing idea of how our all-knowing God could "change His mind," and more amazingly how our human prayers may cause Him to do so. But for today, let's see what else we can glean from this story of the Golden calf as we read through it together. So let's begin.



*Exodus 32: 1 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, 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.**"*

The first thing we notice from this verse is how short some people's memories can be. We say show us one miracle and we'll believe for life. But apparently such memories are short lived as people forget one miracle while waiting impatiently for the next.

Jesus also experienced this similar kind of unbelief from His listeners, when after having fed the 5,000 with three loaves and two fishes, the next day as He tries to depart they

chase after Him not because they now believe but rather because they want more bread and to see more magic (cf. John 6:25-42).

Think of how many miracles the people of Israel had already observed in the six short months that God has made His power known to them. There were all the plagues in Egypt from which they were miraculously spared, then the parting of the Red Sea which delivered them from harm while decimating Pharaoh's army and the daily supply of bread in the wilderness, which we assume they are still harvesting and eating here at the foot of Mt Sinai.

But now, just forty days after standing in solemn assembly as Moses read God's commands to them – which they had then vowed, "*all that the Lord has spoken we will do,*" (24:7), They think nothing of both dismissing Moses as "*this man who brought us out of Egypt*" and breaking as many of God's commands as they can in one sinful orgy.

Notice also that they were still either confusing Moses with God, or as I think, they had just decided to ditch both Moses and his God, along with all these commands which they deemed too demanding. They were going to start over and make for themselves a brand new religion more to their liking; Moses' forty day absence merely gave them the excuse they were looking for. A clue to their larger rebellious intent is in who they give credit to for bringing them out of Egypt.

First, they said, ***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 ...*** Moses may have led the way, but he always attributed the miracles and their deliverance to being of God's making. As exemplified at the first reading of His commandments God had said, "***I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other God's before me***" (20:2-3).

Notice here in verse 4, as Aaron presents them with the golden calf, they are now saying, ***These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*** And then they held a festival the very next day to celebrate their new gods completely ignoring the commands of the One True God, who had earlier told them when and where they were to celebrate three specific festivals in His honor (32:4).

So these were not a people who just slipped up in observing a few commands, these are a people in full rebellion, who have decided to completely reject the God of Abraham along with His commands, for an easier religion of their own making.

Now let's turn our attention to Aaron's part in this disaster. Our translation reads, ***the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us."*** But in the Hebrew language this verse reads more confrontationally: "***they gathered against Aaron and said get up and make gods for us...***" This was no polite request and but rather a threat, so in his defense Aaron was not so much an eager volunteer as

a fearful captive of their demands. For his part, Aaron at least tried to redirect the next day's festival into the proper worship of "Jehovah," but the people had other ideas.



Beginning at verse 6, Scripture reads, *They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.* In the Hebrew language, that word "revel" has inescapable overtones of sexual activity. The people were not just partying, they were letting loose with a full blown orgy in the style of the fertility cults that they were more used to, which I am sure broke many more of God's commands.

Also remember that Aaron had only gained prominence for being his brother's mouthpiece after Moses had tried to wriggle out of God's call by claiming that he couldn't speak. No matter how privileged Aaron was to stand beside Moses, he just was not the dynamic commanding leader that his younger brother had grown to become; so under his leadership the people ran wild!

He wasn't even a good liar. When Moses asked what the people could have possibly done to make him lead them into such great sin, Aaron first tried blaming the people, replying to Moses that he knew how "*bent on doing evil*" these people were ... and anyway all he had really done was to throw some gold into the fire after which that calf just miraculously came out all by itself; a tale so ludicrous that Moses didn't even bother responding to it (32:21-25).

Now here is where this story gets really interesting. Before all this, Moses had been high up on the mountain taking down God's instructions for building the tabernacle and the right ways for worshipping, when God suddenly informs him of what the people are doing at the foot of the mountain

⁷*The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! **YOUR people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely;** ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' ⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "**O LORD, why does YOUR wrath burn hot against YOUR people, whom YOU brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?***

Certainly with all their whining over the past six months, the people of Israel had shown God how hard they would be to work with. But now with this act of utter defiance against all God had commanded them to do, He is ready to wash His hands completely

of them. To Pharaoh, God had called the children of Israel, "*my son*" (Ex. 4:22). Now He says to Moses "***YOUR people ... have acted perversely.***" "**Step back I am going to wipe them all out and start over with you.**"

After over 400 years of waiting for God's promise to Abraham to grow into a reality, after all this effort to bring these people to freedom, God would just wipe out the entire nation and start over with Moses. ?? !!



Moses needed to act quickly, to somehow turn the table by reminding God, that these people belonged uniquely to Himself – not Moses -- and that God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not only to build this people into a great nation, but bring them safely into the promised land and wouldn't God be embarrassed in front of all those defeated Egyptians if He ended up doing their dirty work for them by wiping out the Children of Israel in the wilderness. And so for the moment, Moses persuaded God to change His mind and let the people continue to live.

If only the people of Israel had known how close they came that day to being utterly destroyed were it not for Moses' intervention in their behalf, they would never again call him "*that man Moses.*" **And this isn't the last time Moses will have to put himself between these sinful people and their very angry God; thus proving why God had specifically chosen him in the first place to lead them out of Egypt. In a very short time, Moses had grown from a stuttering shepherd, into a courageous leader of the people willing even to argue with God in their behalf.** Willing even, as we will next see, to offer his own life as a sacrifice for the sins of this "*stiff necked people*" whom God had given to him to lead.



Thus after convincing God to change His mind, Moses heads down the mountain to see how bad things had become. The answer is... really bad. Moses is so appalled at the sight of the people *running wild to the derision of their enemies* (vs.25), that he smashes the stone tablets on the ground in dramatic demonstration of what the people had done to God's commands.



He then calls for the son's of Levi to take their swords and run through the camp killing – even family, friends and neighbors – everyone caught in sinful acts before the golden calf. That day 3,000 people died. By our standards, this seems like an extreme reaction to a bit of idolatry, but remember, that 3,000 is just a small percentage of all the people who moments earlier God had been ready to completely wipe out.

As a historic side note, it was this act of unquestioning loyalty to God on the part of the sons of Levi that thereafter consecrated them as the priestly tribe who would serve in God's tabernacle (32:39).

After this Moses then burns down and grinds up the calf, mixing its ashes with water which he makes the people drink in an act of humiliation and repentance. Can you imagine the peoples' reaction to drinking this ash laden water? Bet your Sunday School lesson didn't include either of these Mosaic responses.



Then Moses goes back up the mountain to see if he can change God's mind for a second time – to find out what **he can do to make atonement for the peoples' sin**. Understand that the word "atonement" means a penalty, a payment, of some kind must be made; in this case Moses offers God his own life in payment for the peoples' sin.

*³² now [God], if you will only forgive their sin—**but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.**"³³ But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book."³⁴ But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin."³⁵ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron made.*

Like Jesus, God's own son who is yet to come, **Moses willingly offers his life in atonement for the sins of God's people. But even Moses, the great man and friend of God -- himself still being a sinner -- is unable to pay that price for others.** So for the foreseeable future the People of Israel must continue to live under the law; each being punished for their own sin. The sacrificial system which God will next establish will thereafter provide a temporary cover for the peoples' sins until one day – "*in the fullness of time*" - God's promised Messiah, the Lamb of God, would come in order to make a complete atonement for the sins of the whole world ... once for all. At this however, God only promises Moses that He will delay their punishment for another day.

But God still has a very current problem yet to be dealt with. He had vowed to the Patriarchs to bring their descendants safely back to the Promised Land and to bless them in that land flowing with milk and honey. But in light of what they have just done, God realizes that with such stubborn rebelliousness buried so deeply in their hearts it will only be a matter of time before these people do something else to again provoke God - in spite of His promises – in spite of Moses' interventions - to wipe the Children of Israel completely out.



3).

So as chapter 33 opens, God directs Moses to lead the people on to the Promised Land and God promises that He will do for the Children of Israel all He vowed to the Patriarchs He would do. **But that God Himself would no longer go with these a "stiff necked people"** ... or else they would never make it there alive; instead He will send a lower angel in His place (33:2-

Thus for a third time in a matter of just a few days, Moses must again try to change God's mind. We begin our reading in **Exodus 33:12-17**.

*Moses said to the LORD, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight."¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. **Consider too that this nation is your people.**'¹⁴ God said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'¹⁵ [but Moses] said to Him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.'¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, **I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.**'*

*The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; **for you have found favor in my sight**, and I know you by name.'*

First, based on their personal relationship, Moses asks for God's continued presence with himself, Then after God assures Moses that He will never leave him, Moses then expands God's promise to the entire nation... **his don't leave me, becomes "don't leave us,"** again reminding God that there is no way the people of Israel - as God had promised - could become a distinct people, a world blessing nation of priests, if God did not continue in this journey all the way with them. And thus again God relents, changing His mind because His friend Moses has asked this of Him.

Which leaves us with just one big question left to answer.

How was Moses able to change God's mind and who must we be, how must we ask, if we want God to change course?

This is the real question that the story of the Golden Calf is challenging us to answer. While we can find some clues right here in Exodus and also all throughout the rest of our Bible, the first big clue can be discovered by asking another question.

While Moses was up there on the mountain with the people running wild down below, why did God bother to tell Moses what He was planning to do? Why didn't God just immediately wipe the people out and inform Moses that now they could begin again?

The answer is, that just like God's conversation with Abraham over the destruction of Sodom, for some strange reason, God wanted to have his friend Moses' input before acting.

In some strange way, God so values His relationship with us - the humanity that He has created - that He is always seeking to be both in dialog and in partnership with us in His rule of this world. God has invited us to ask, seek, and knock, and to come boldly before His throne; that like any good father He knows what we need and will give it to us. (Luke 11:9-13, Hebrews 4:16).

So the Apostles urge us *to not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* (Philippians 4:6).

And James the brother of Jesus, assures us that the *prayer of a righteous person* – like Elijah praying to start and stop the rains – *is powerful and effective* (4:7).

How such prayer works to change the mind of our omniscient all-powerful God, Who *declares the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention'* (Isaiah 46:10) ... **I just don't know.** Like the mysterious appearances all throughout our Bible of the invisible God whom no one has ever seen, I am content to leave in tension this apparently opposed truth of the sovereign God inviting us to change His mind.

But at least we can see what were some of the qualities in Moses that afforded him such powerful leverage with God?

Scripture says that Moses *found favor in God's sight, and God knew him by name* (33:17). Scripture also says that God spoke with Moses *face to face*, which we know is metaphorical language - because God is an unseen Spirit. But this does mean that Moses and God could converse heart to heart, with nothing hidden from each other. What a great definition and example of what prayer actually is speaking with God face to face, heart to heart.

Abraham was called "*a friend of God.*" King David was known as "*a man after God's own heart.*" To Moses, God simply said, "*I know your name*" meaning that God so highly valued His relationship with Moses that He was not going to do anything with regard to the people of Israel until the two of them had discussed it.

That is not only amazing, you might even call it amazing grace. But God assures all His children such open access to His throne; so let's make a point of doing so fervently and often this new year....

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
Hebrews 4:16

Why don't we do a bit of that right now....