

The Golden Calf

Exodus 32 Deuteronomy 9

Introduction

Your heart just has to go out to Moses, doesn't it? To begin with he had a job he did not want and had done everything he could think of to turn down. He was quite content living in Midian, working for his father-in-law, and raising a family.

But, God would not leave him alone. That seems to be a habit of God's, upsetting the apple cart. The gospel of love seems to be such a simple message, but it seldom calls us to complacency or comfort.

What kind of leader was Moses when he led the Israelites to the only patch of real estate in all the Middle East that was not sitting on oil?"

God saddled Moses with a quarrelsome and onerous people. Between slavery in Egypt and the Promised Land forty years later they were seldom content, seldom happy. They complained a lot. The Hebrew word for it in the Old Testament is "murmur." They murmured a lot.

Exodus 24:1-3; 7-18

Up the mountain

The Hebrews had arrived at Sinai, received the 10 commandments and agreed to abide by them. (Exodus 24:70) Moses then goes up the mountain to ratify the covenant with God. We all know that waiting for God patiently is not easy. Moses *stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights*.

Moses is up on the mountaintop, taught by God and given detailed instructions on the Ten Commandments, the Ark and worship and festivals. Everything you could think about to make Israel a righteous and good living people. Finally he receives the “the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God” Exodus 31:18.

Not many days after they had said, *"Everything that the Lord has said we will do!"* we see them breaking the first and second commandments that God had just given them on Mount Sinai!

The people waiting below grow restless, concerned and finally, frantic. "Where is Moses? Did he run away? Did he fall off the mountain? Did he say something wrong and get incinerated by God?" Who knows? So they approach Aaron and say: "Make us a god to lead us. For Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, who knows where he is by now? "

Incredibly, Aaron accedes to their demand and collects golden earrings worn by the people. (*Parents of teens, please note that even in those heroic days of yesteryear, boys wore earrings - but then, so did their fathers.*) Aaron melts them down and uses the gold thus obtained to make a golden calf. Aaron shows it to the people who gleefully shout, "This is your god, O Israel, who took you up out of the land of Egypt." And then Aaron proclaims "A religious festival will take place tomorrow," and it did in such a way as to make people like Cecile B. DeMille joyful for generations.

Was Aaron setting up the calf in opposition to God? Was he was rather making God visible. We see this when he declares that the people should have a feast to the Lord. The people make God into what they want Him to be. That is the great sin that they commit. The breaking of the second commandment is not the only worship of idols, but rather the diminishing of God to what we want Him to be. The great sin then was to try and make God becomes their servant and has to do what they want Him to do. The Israelites descend into religion. They domesticate God and make him, as they want Him to be. Religion is self-centred in that it looks at what we want and then makes the God who will deliver this to us. Faith on the other hand, is selfless in that it acknowledges that God is beyond our understanding and therefore has a better idea of how we can grow and develop.

Not much has changed today. The calf was an ancient symbol of power and fertility. When we look at these two attributes we can see that the desires of humankind haven't changed much. All one has to do is look at the news and see that the pursuit of power and the exultation of sexuality is still very much in the forefront of human desire.

Do we worship idols? – The obvious idol can be money, clothes, sex, soccer, television, self, another person like yourself, or the traditions of your ancestors. How often do we say, "I think God is like" Limiting God to our understanding and imagination. For others, their religious obligations are their idols; they put more importance on praying and fasting than on listening to the Word of God! Anything that replaces God and His truth is an idol.

Aware of what is going on down below, God despatches Moses. "You had better get down there quick. Those people you brought out of Egypt have really messed things up."

He doesn't say. "They are trying to worship Me another way." He dismisses it. He has nothing to do with it. He will have nothing to do with it. He says, "The people; your people Moses" - He's not saying here My People - "you brought out of the land of Egypt, they have corrupted themselves." Then in Exodus 32:10 He goes on to say. "Now leave Me alone, so that My anger may burn against them, that I may destroy them. Then I will make you a great nation."

Now what is God doing? - He is testing Moses.

The people I brought out of Egypt? It was not I. I was very happy tending the sheep of my father-in-law Jethro, living in that nice, big house with his daughter Zipporah. I did not go looking for You, God. As I recollect, it was You who set up that sound and light show with the ever-burning, never-consumed bush. It was You who sent me back to Egypt. As a matter of fact, didn't You say to me "I have seen the suffering of My people," that is, Your people, in Egypt. But now, suddenly, they are mine? I brought them out of Egypt, like I could do all those wonderful miracles and stuff?

If Moses had such thoughts, he obviously thought better about voicing them.

God is testing Moses. How much Moses cares! (Verse 32.) He prays - he confesses the sin of the people. We see how well Moses knew the Lord and how to speak to him; there is a kind of divine sarcasm. He knew how to get at the very heart of God and he said, "Are these the people that you brought out of the land of Egypt? Did you bring them out of Egypt in order to destroy them? Bad as they are? Can I ask You to reconsider your decision?"

After some months of working with God, Moses knows how to respond. "Bad move, God. Horrible public relations implications. You finally got the Egyptians to realise that you are all-powerful and that we are on the side of the winning God. Now if You kill all of our people, what will the Egyptians think? That you brought your own people out of Egypt just to kill us in the desert."

Notice how subtly Moses responds to God's comment about "your" people? "God," he says, "didn't You make certain promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about bringing their descendants into the Promised Land? Was there a statute of limitations on that promise?". God made the covenant eternally and mutually binding and unconditional. Thus, not even God can break it.

God smiles and says, "OK, Moses. You convinced me. No destruction, but you still have to go down and straighten those people out."

Down the mountain

So, Moses comes down the mountain, carrying the stone tablets, fully intending to talk sense into those impetuous and impulsive Israelites. But he takes one look at the wild party, and totally loses it. In a rage, Moses hurls the holy stones carrying the words written by no less than God, to the ground, smashing them. The covenant was broken, the relationship was shattered. He wades into the midst of the revellers, grabs the golden calf off its pedestal, hurls it into the bonfire, pounds it into powder, scatters it over the nearby lake, and drives the agitated and confused people into the water, shouting, "Drink it! Drink!".

We start off this story with God off-loading responsibility onto Moses. "Look at what YOUR people are up to now." Then what happens when Moses turns to his brother Aaron for an explanation? "What's going on here?", he asks. "I go away for a few days and leave you in charge and you let this happen? Where did you ever get the lame-brain idea to make that stupid calf?"

"Calf? What calf? Oh, that calf? Well, Moses, you won't believe what happened."

"I won't? Try me!"

"Well, these people - you see what a wild and dangerous bunch they are - they came to me and said 'Make us a god.' So I asked them to give me their gold. When they gave it to me, I threw it into the fire. When the fire died down, lo and behold, there was the calf." Does that sound like the sport of lamer excuses we give to God when we know we have done wrong?

Silence. "Are you sticking by that story brother?"

"It is the best I can do."

By now, everything has broken down into sheer pandemonium, and the initial shock and fear and confusion is turning to rage. The mob is growing dangerous. They didn't want Moses back - they preferred Aaron - they could handle Aaron - They didn't want him. They respect him deeply, but they didn't want him.

So Moses issues a challenge at the entrance to the camp. "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me" exodus 32:26 and all the Levites rallied to him. On God's authority He deputises them as riot police and sends them into the camp with swords to disperse the crowds and restore order. By the time they get done, 3,000 people are dead.

After the riot.

Now imagine what was said after when peace was restored.

Aaron might ask how are you going to explain the broken tablets to God?"

"Them? Well I was so upset by the sight of the golden calf that they kind of just slipped out of my hands."

Aaron looks at him with a smile. "Yeah, and they just happened to land on a rock about ten feet away from you with enough force to break into smithereens. I hope they come with a warranty."

They did. God understands. God had to know that Moses has a short fuse, yet God picked him for the job in spite of it. God never mentioned the broken tablets. But the Lord told Moses to chisel out **two stone tablets** to replace the ones that he had broken. On these the Lord rewrote **the commandments** which the children of Israel had already broken.

To follow God is to have no other gods before us: no other power systems, no other securities no other plans and schemes. The road ahead for the Israelites is a road where there is but one Power, one Purpose and one direction and, interestingly enough that road led to a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of beauty and wealth.

In order for Moses to "go" with the people on the journey to the Promised Land he needed strong reassurance that God was going along and not just leaving Moses and the stiff-necked idol builders in the lurch. "But God we cannot go on without you."

And God relents towards him - and He says, My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest. (Exodus 33:14)

Conclusion

We have seen that God is intolerant of sin.

That sin has its consequences.

We have seen that God is merciful and gracious, forgiving the people and Moses for another fit of temper. He is a covenant keeping God.

Historically when believing Jews mourn those events most painful in the collective memory of the community they remember that God's wrath that could quickly lead to communal demise is trumped by the eternity of the covenant. That message was exceedingly important for Jewish ancestors to hear as they went off into exile time and again. The signs of divine favour might be absent, but the covenant is present. It was a message they held on to during the Holocaust, and those who believe in Israel today hold on to that same hope when the whole world seems to be against them.

He wants Gods glory'. How much do we want? A nice meeting? It is as if God says, "Oh, very well - there is a place by Me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock. (Verse 21) And it shall come to pass while My glory passeth by, I will put thee in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover thee with My hand while I pass by. (Verse 22) - that's what I will do, while My glory passeth by. And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back parts, but My face shall not be seen. (Verse 23) You will see Me go, but I will grant to you your request, I will come to you in My glory.

This story then shows us the contrast between religion and faith. Religion is Self-centred, Faith is Selfless

What a great sin the Israelites committed! They had **broken** God's holy law.