

**Exodus 32 The Golden Calf**

**Theme: the depth of human depravity can corrupt even our worship, and requires a deeper atonement than Moses can offer.**

**INTRO:**

Have you ever been caught up in a march or demo that got out of hand? Been arrested or kettled by the police?

We are very fortunate to live in one of the most law-abiding regions of the most peaceful nations on earth - Brits queue patiently, merely glare at those who push in, and say "Excuse me!" when we have been wronged. Our police patrol unarmed. Other nations get out of hand and riot - French farmers and fisherman. But even in Britain the police will take up their riot shields and fire tear gas and rubber bullets, if order breaks down and the bricks and bottles begin to fly. I did some basic naval training in crowd control 40 years ago, but never had to use it for real. But our bible reading from Exodus describes a scene of high drama and disorder, as the people of Israel break loose against God and suffer fearful consequences.

Last week we heard how Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments of the Covenant, and how the people of Israel agreed to God's terms: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." Then Moses returned to the Mountain and the intervening chapters 21-31 describe the details of the Law and the Tabernacle in which the glory of God will dwell among his people. But Moses' delay (40 days) is too much for the people, who turn to idolatry.

This story runs from ch 32-34, and we are tackling it in two instalments. This week we'll look at ch 32-33.1. It is a sober reminder of the deep darkness that lurks in every human heart - we can corrupt anything - even the worship of God, the deadly danger it leads us into, and the double difficulty that Moses faces in saving his people.

**1 DEEP DARKNESS 1-6**

Moses' delay leads the people to gather around/ against Aaron and demand that he make them gods to go before them. We may be astonished and perplexed at such a demand, like a thunderstorm on a clear summer day. They have seen the parting of the red sea, they are feeding daily on manna

from heaven, and camping before Mount Sinai, before the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. But they can't cope without Moses, and clearly don't think much of him: "this fellow". Surely they know he is up the mountain? They want a visible, tangible representation of god to assure them. It's no excuse, but remember that these people have just escaped from Egypt, which was filled with magnificent temples and awe-inspiring images of the gods on every street corner: some of them may have worked on building and decorating them - but now they have nothing to see.

The Hebrew text is intriguing. The Hebrew word for 'god' is 'elohim', which is actually a plural, but when it refers to the LORD, the God of Abraham, the verb is always singular, and when it refers to pagan gods, the verb is plural. The text suggests that they too want lots of visible gods to comfort them.

The people demand action from Aaron, the brother of Moses, and he tells them to donate their gold, and makes a golden calf. The writer shows his contempt: perhaps the Israelites saw it as a mighty Bull - an image of divine strength. Egyptian gods such as Hathor, Mnevis and Ra were symbolised with a bull, and the sacred Apis Bull was regarded as the manifestation of Ptah, and mummified at death. The Israelites cry out:

These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!

But Aaron puts a spin on it - and says, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD" -he claims that this image is really a representation of the LORD.

This was clearly against the Second Commandment: You shall not make an idol in the form of anything in heaven or on earth.

Some scholars argue whether the Israelites meant to break the first commandment as well - "You shall have no other gods before me": were they trying to worship the LORD who brought them out of Egypt, or actually worshipping other gods?

It doesn't much matter if they break one commandment or two: they have broken the commandments - we don't get to choose which we want to keep.

And the consequence of that misplaced, corrupted worship is startling:

v.6 And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play (ESV) got up to indulge in revelry". It sounds as if they are having too much fun - disorderly and dissolute - with a suggestion of sexual immorality.

No doubt we find that different things help us to worship - liturgy, music, silence, candles, buildings, and there is some room for some freedom of choice, but worship is not meant to please us, but God. Why is the LORD so exercised by how we worship him? Worship matters: it affects us. if you

worship a dumb idol that makes no ethical demands, you will do what your heart desires, and our hearts are deceitful.

Jer 17.9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "The human heart is a factory of idols" (Calvin)

The danger of idolatry is a recurring theme in the OT: the writers knew from experience of their neighbours what they were talking about.

Ps 115.8 Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

Idolatry degrades us. Today we may not be tempted to bow down to images of wood and stone, but the NT warns us repeatedly to keep our hearts from idols: 2 Pet 2.19 For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

If we worship money, we will become greedy, misers. if we worship fame, we will become proud or vain. We can take any good thing, or person, but if we make it the centre of our lives, it will damage and degrade us.

But idolatry does more than damage ourselves it: it enrages God.

## **2. DEADLY DANGER: 7-10**

Moses is up the Mountain when the LORD tells him what has happened. The Lord knows what is going on below: he knows what is in our hearts and minds. And idolatry fills him with a burning anger.

v.10 Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.

Why does the LORD not accept that this is just the Israelites's preferred way of worshipping him? Because he is NOT a bull - a dumb ox that eats grass. It is an insufferable slander even to suggest it. His glory is diminished by idols. Idolatry to Him is an act of spiritual Adultery. His bride has gone back to her old gods in Egypt, and like a groom jilted at the altar, the LORD is filled with jealous fury. He calls off the wedding, cancels the covenant, and tells Moses, Go down: tell your people, whom you brought out of Egypt - they're nothing to do with me any more. This is one of the most dramatic passages in the bible. But it may trouble us. Is this what God is really like - our God? Or is the God of the Old Testament different? That view is tempting, but it is an ancient heresy. Yet we have to wrestle with the scriptures. Not only do these verses show us a god who is jealous and angry, but also one who seems to change his mind after Moses talks him down. Does God change his mind? It says elsewhere that he does not:

Num 23.19 God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?

1 Sam 15.29 He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind."

If you believe that scripture is inspired and does not contradict itself, what are we to make of these words? They seem deeply embarrassing.

Did you read any of the Whatsapp messages from Matt Hancock during the COVID crisis? He entrusted them to a journalist who was writing his book, but she leaked them to the Telegraph, and destroyed what little was left of his reputation. Has Moses leaked his negotiations with God? Or did God authorise it? Wouldn't it have been wiser for the LORD to omit vv 7-14 and send Moses straight down the mountain to sort out the Israelites?

These words are mysterious, but they matter. The Israelites have chosen to worship God as a dumb ox: perhaps we prefer to think of God as a bland and benign force, a nebulous feeling. God is not a man (or woman), but he made us, male and female in *his* image : *his* not *its*. God is more than human, but he is not less. He is not a beast, and he is not an it, the Force, the cloud, cosmic Google. God chooses to reveal Himself in this dialogue in the only way that we can begin to comprehend, as a person with feelings of passion, of love and anger. He would rather we thought of him as filled with holy anger, than harmless indifference. He interacts with people in time, and yet he is eternal, and what for us is past or future is all present to him. Perhaps from here and now, it looks like a change of mind, but God's eternal purpose does not change. So let us look at how Moses deals with God and with his people. He faces a

## **3. DOUBLE DIFFICULTY: 11-14**

Have you heard of Shuttle Diplomacy? The term was first used to describe Henry Kissinger's efforts in the 1970s to bring peace between the Arabs and Israelis, flying from one capital to another. In the same way, Moses seeks to bring peace between God and Israel. In the next scene he will head down the mountain to deal with the people, but first he must try to talk down God. An **Act of Desperate Diplomacy:**

Moses here is magnificent: he has matured so much since his encounter at the Burning Bush. There God told him that He was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that the people of Israel was His Beloved Son, that he would rescue them so that the Egyptians would know that the LORD is God. Now Moses repeats all those claims and promises of God back to him and seeks to

**avert disaster.** God, you promised, you swore, remember! Had God really forgotten his eternal promises in the heat of his passion?

There is another subtle clue: The Lord tells Moses:

v.7 Go down to your people, v.10 Leave me alone. Then I will make a great nation of you.” But what value is such a promise from a God who changes his mind and breaks them? Does the LORD really want Moses to go down, or is he inviting him to challenge him, to plead for Israel, to pray? Moses does not excuse the sin of Israel, he clings to the promises of God, and so God keeps his promises, oath and covenant. Is that really changing his mind?

### **Dreadful Discipline**

Now Moses goes down the mountain to deal with Israel. Now we are told that Moses also is burning with anger - with a divine sense of injustice. His first action is to smash the tablets of the Covenant. The deal is off. He is reading the Riot Act to the people of Israel.

Second he smashes the golden calf and makes them drink the gold dust: there is no room for sentimentality - even it was a beautiful image. There is no place for sin in our hearts or minds.

Thirdly he confronts Aaron, who tries to excuse the people - they can't help it- and himself. I collected the gold, threw it into the fire - and out came this calf. It is the lamest excuse since Adam blamed Eve for taking the fruit. But still the problem persists v.25 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control, so he stands in the gate and asks, “Who is on the Lord’s side?” and the Levites rally to him, perhaps with Aaron at the back, as a kind of citizen militia or vigilante force, and restore order forcibly. Where were the Levites when Aaron faced the mob alone? Did their ear-rings go in the calf? But now with some firm leadership, they feel compelled to resist. This is not just a religious debate. It is a riot: the nation’s life is at stake, and the Levites are effectively imposing martial law. It is not a pretty scene. Such slaughter should make us very uncomfortable, and there is no justification for the church using force to compel belief or orthodoxy. But if we recognise that sin still lurks in the deep darkness of our hearts, and poses a deadly danger to our relationship with God, then we will know that we too need discipline. To be a disciple of Jesus is to learn to love God with all our heart and obey the teaching of Jesus. We need the personal spiritual disciplines of prayer, study and regular fellowship.

And if we neglect our own spiritual discipline, Jesus and the apostles taught how the local church should exercise loving discipline to recall us to true faith. If false teaching and idolatry threaten the unity and holiness of the church, there are means we must use to protect the church, as we shall see in our sermon series on 1 Corinthians.

### **5. DISASTER DEFERRED 32.30-33.6**

Finally when order has been restored, Moses speaks to the people saying: v.30 “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; **perhaps** I can make atonement for your sin.” And Moses goes before the LORD and confesses their sin, and pleads for their forgiveness. He even offers himself as their substitute.

32: But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” Moses so identifies with his people that he is willing to die for them, and instead of them. The LORD has relented, and deferred disaster, but he will not go with his people, because they are stiff-necked: they are like an unruly ox that will not bear the yoke of his law, and he might destroy them. But Moses has little confidence that the Lord will forgive. So the story will continue next week. And the LORD will not accept the self-sacrifice that Moses offers, because Moses too is a sinner. There is only one who can mediate between God and his people, who can offer himself as a perfect sacrifice for sin, and who is the perfect image of God - not an ox, or a force, but the man Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age

He alone can blot out our sins, and give us a new heart in place of the stiff neck that will not submit. He alone reveals the true glory of God. He alone is worthy of our worship

**CONCLUSION:** Exodus 32 reminds of the deep darkness of sin that lurks in the hearts of all, from highest to lowest, and can corrupt even our worship. It reminds us of the dangerous holiness of God, but it points us to the Mediator greater than Moses who comes from God and makes full atonement for our sin. So let us worship God as He reveals himself, and guard our hearts with true spiritual discipline, so that the LORD may be with us.

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