

The Golden Calf, Then and Now

¹⁵Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. ¹⁶The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

¹⁷When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp.”

¹⁸Moses replied:

“It is not the sound of victory,
it is not the sound of defeat;
it is the sound of singing that I hear.”

¹⁹When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

²¹He said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?”

²²“Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. ²³They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ ²⁴So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”

²⁵Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. ²⁶So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him.

²⁷Then he said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” ²⁸The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. ²⁹Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.”

Tell me, when God handed down the ten commandments on two stone tablets, what was the very first commandment on the list? That’s right, “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” At first blush, that sounds easy enough to obey, right? I don’t expect that any of us is making a habit of worshipping Allah or Buddha or Baal. And when that same commandment goes on to say, “*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below,*” we’re maybe thinking, “No problem. It’s not like I’ve set up a little golden calf in my bedroom. I may have a fish mounted on the wall or some duck decoys on the mantle, but it’s not like I worship those images. I’m really not into idols.

Wait a minute. Are you sure about that? You realize, an idol is not simply a statue you bow down to, or a pagan deity you pledge allegiance to. An idol is anything that we fear, love, or trust more than the true God. An idol is anything or anyone that we value more than God and his Word. Now granted, sometimes we’re tempted to idolize things that are clearly bad things. If you

love to get drunk, or can't get enough pornography, or really enjoy beating people up, those are all bad things. And Satan is really good at tempting us to love bad things. But Satan is even better at tempting us to love good things in the wrong order.

What do I mean by that? Think about some of the good things that God has given you. Your life, your family, your reputation, your career, your hobbies, a good night's sleep. Satan can take every one of those good things and tempt you to make them more important to you than God. Satan is going to tempt you and me to make a good thing, the greatest thing. The thing that fits in the number one slot in our heart. And when we put anything other than God in that slot, when we fear, love, and trust in anything more than the God of the Bible, we are guilty of idolatry. We've just set up our own little golden calf in our hearts.

In fact, that's why our Scripture reading for today is so very relevant. Today we turn our attention to a Bible History lesson which many of us have known since we were in Sunday school. It's the account of the golden calf. But what we may not have realized back when we were children, is just how applicable these words are for our lives today. Today we want to draw some parallels between God's people then and God's people today. Our theme for today is simply this:

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For us to fully benefit from this account, it's important to put ourselves into the sandals of the Israelites. Imagine, you've just been witness to some of the greatest miracles in the history of the world. The God of the universe brought 10 plagues against the Egyptians, bringing that world superpower to its knees. The Lord split the waters of the Red Sea and brought the Israelites to the foot of Mount Sinai, where God was now communicating with Moses from within a dense cloud of billowing smoke. But now it's been 40 days since Moses had entered the cloud. And now the people are beginning to wonder, "Maybe Moses didn't make it. Maybe Moses has been consumed by the fire of God. Who is going to lead us now?" So, what do the people say to Aaron, the brother of Moses? They say, "*Come, make us gods, (literally, come, make us a god) who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what happened to him.*" (Exodus 32:1). And so, what does Aaron do? He asks the people to hand over their gold earrings and he molds them into the shape of a bull calf. Why a calf? Because when the Israelites were in Egypt, that's what the Egyptians worshipped. They worshipped Apis, the god of power and fertility, the god who was often depicted in the image of a calf. In other words, when the people asked Aaron to make them a god, he went back to an image of a god they were used to seeing. A god that the people around them were worshiping, a god that they maybe had participated in worshipping.

Doesn't Satan use the same tactic today? When the devil wants to create an idol in our lives, he doesn't start with something completely foreign to us. Rather he uses something that we're already very familiar with. He uses things we're accustomed to seeing and doing. For example, I'll bet there are very few of you here today who are just craving a snort of cocaine. But maybe the urge to check your phone in the middle of a worship service—that's a different story. For you, time on your cell phone may be the far more appealing idol. And chances are, I'm not going to spend too much time thinking about robbing banks, but too much time thinking about the Packers last draft class—that could be my golden calf. How easy it is to slip back into the old ruts. Once I start gossiping, or binging, or clicking on one of those websites, it's so much easier to go back there again. It's what I'm used to, it's what I'm comfortable with, even if I know it's wrong.

Which brings us to the second parallel between the golden calf that Aaron made and the

golden calves in our hearts and lives. And it's simply this: Sometimes we try to have it both ways. Sometimes we try to divide our hearts between the true God and all these other false gods. I mean, isn't that what Aaron tried to do? Did you know that after Aaron built this golden calf for the people—the next thing he does? Exodus 32:5 tells us. (Aaron) *built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."* Wait, what?!? You build an idol and then you say you're going to worship the LORD, I mean, the True God? How do those two things go together? Is that possible?

Actually, it happens all the time. In fact, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that it's probably happening right now. I mean, here we are worshiping the true God. But are we still clinging to our own little golden calves? Are we trying to have it both ways? You know, maybe we're thinking to ourselves, "I can be a good Christian and still love my money more than anything else. I can make sure I get what I want first." Or, "As long as my rear end is in the pew, it doesn't matter where my mind is, or where my heart is. As long as I can claim membership in a Christian church, I don't actually have to show up. I can let my worship life get trumped by my tee time or my kids' sports schedule or an extra hour of sleep or any other golden calf in my life." In fact, are there times when we just kind of go through the motions of a religious life—and then go back to what we would really rather be doing with our time? Isn't that what the Israelites did? Scripture says, *So the next day, the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.* In other words, after they put in their time with God, they went out and partied it up. And in this case, that meant engaging in sexual immorality and behavior that was out of control.

Is it any wonder that when the True God witnessed all this, his anger burned against the Israelites? I mean, the God who had done so much for Israel, the God who had made a covenant with his people, the God whose first commandment was "You shall have no other gods," the God who only days before had heard the people promise, "We will do everything the Lord has said"—when that holy God witnessed that the people, just like that, turned away to worship another god, is it any wonder that God says to Moses up on the mountain, *"I have seen these people and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. (Exodus 32:9-10)*

You realize, God hasn't changed in 4,000 years. God is still a jealous God. The psalmist said it well. *You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. (Psalm 5:4-5)* That's still our God. When we allow anything to become more important to us than God, when we love anyone more than God, we earn God's righteous anger. We fall under the condemnation of a just and jealous God—unless, of course, someone steps in to plead our case.

And that brings us to the third parallel between the golden calf then and golden calves now. You see, when God said to Moses, "Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I destroy them," do you know what Moses' response was? It's recorded in Deuteronomy 32:11,13. *Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'"*

Do you see what Moses is doing there? He's interceding for the people of Israel. He's pleading their case. But he doesn't build his case on who the Israelites are. He doesn't say, "Oh,

what they did wasn't that bad. Their hearts were in the right place.” No, rather, he puts all his hope in who God is. He holds God to his promise that God is going to make the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob a great nation and bring them into the Promised Land. In the end, Moses was counting on God to be exactly who he once described himself to be, namely, “*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*” (Exodus 34:6-7)

You realize, dear Christians, that God is still your God to this very day. Only in your case, the person who is now interceding for you before that God is not Moses. Rather, it's Jesus. What does Scripture say? *Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is now interceding for us.* (Romans 8:34) And of course, when Jesus intercedes for us, he doesn't build his case on what we have done (thank God!), but rather on what he has done for us. What does Scripture say? *The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin.* (1 John 1:8) And again, *We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* (Hebrews 10:10).

My friends, that's who Jesus has made you to be. He's made you his people, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. And because God has made you #1 in his heart, he's equipped you to make him #1 in your heart. You see, that's what Christians do. By God's grace, Christians love God above all. How did Jesus put it? “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment* (Matthew 22:37-38). That, dear Christians, is what God give you and me the heart to do. To love all of God's gifts, yes, love your family, love your job, love your life, but love God, who gave you those gifts, even more, for Jesus' sake. Amen.