

The Golden Calf

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I'm probably going to give my age away when I say this, but I remember being young and seeing my mom watching soap operas.

Now, for those of you in the West or in Australia, soap operas are shows like, some of you can probably help me, Days of Our Lives, maybe, The Bold and the Beautiful.

Any others? A few snickers there. Sorry? David, were you going to say something? But in Asia, of course, there are slightly different dramas, right?

Nowadays, I think it's Korean drama. Is that right? But back in my mom's day, it was the Cantonese dramas from Hong Kong. Now, one thing that fuels these never-ending sagas is what I call the spoiled ending, where the anticipated happy ending never comes.

So, all through the episode, there's the expectation built that some crisis will be resolved. You know, lovers finally getting together and being married, or family crisis averted.

[1 : 1 5] Only it never comes, because something comes along to spoil it. It's a bit like life, probably. But it sort of hooks you for that next episode, isn't it?

It makes you feel, oh, I've got to watch again next week, I've got to tune in to find out what really happens. And that's how I feel a bit about this passage in Exodus. For many weeks now, we've been going through listening to God giving Moses the instructions for the tabernacle, and what we anticipate is that Moses will finally come down from the mountain, Israel will build this tabernacle and find rest with God.

Except it's spoiled by this incident of the golden calf. And so, as we look today, I want you to sort of look out for the numerous allusions that show how this calf is a direct perversion of all that God had in mind for Israel.

And that ultimately, this is what idolatry is. A perversion of God's goodness. A distortion of His good gifts. So, in verse 1, we read, When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, Come, 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. Aaron answered, Take off the golden earrings that your wives, your sons and daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.

[2 : 3 9] So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed to him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord. So the next day, the people rose early, sacrificed burnt offerings, presented fellowship offerings, and afterwards they sat down to eat and drink, and got up to indulge in revelry. Now clearly, the presenting sin here is idolatry, the building of the calf and worshipping it in place of God. But as you look at that passage, underlying it are actually various causes for it.

What I call in my outline, the many facets of sin. So first, notice, right at the start, how the people felt they waited too long. God and Moses, they were taking too long up in the mountains, and so they were sick of waiting.

Mind you, this was only about 40 days. Much shorter than the lockdowns we've been in, haven't it? But Israel had had enough of waiting.

[3 : 4 8] It's one thing for God to promise blessing, but quite another for Him to make us wait. And so as a result, all bets are off. Now things like the Ten Commandments, which God had given, no longer apply.

God, you see, has not kept His side of the bargain, has He? So that, you know, releases us from ours. So on the side, the first commandment, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt,

out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. Not applicable. Second commandment, you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven, or the earth, or the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God. Too bad. Don't need to obey that anymore. And so can you see, while the actual idolatry of building a golden calf might not apply to us today, we can see how some of the underlying causes still do, don't they?

First, being impatient with God, doubting His faithfulness to His Word, and therefore, releasing us from the obligation to obey it.

[5 : 03] And deep down, all of this really just reflects a failure to recognize God for who He is. To recognize that He is faithful to His Word.

That He is true to His character. And you think about it, most sins probably start there, don't they? We think something other than what God truly is.

And then, the rest follows. We start placing our trust in other things, making idols of them. We may not make a graven image like a golden calf, but we start looking to other things for security and provision, whether it's money, or relationships, or achievement, or status.

Now here, of course, we have another facet, which is found in the response by Aaron. So Aaron, you see, acquiesces to the people's demand. And Aaron's rationale we find further down when he's questioned by Moses in verse 21.

So Moses said to Aaron, what did these people do to you that you led them into such a great sin? Aaron answered, do not be afraid, my Lord. You know how prone these people are to evil.

[6 : 12] They said to me, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses, we don't know what has happened to him. And so I told them, whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.

Then they gave me the gold, I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf. Boy, what a miracle. Just throw the gold in, and out came the calf.

What a lie. But notice that Aaron actually knew that the people were prone to evil. He knew that what they were doing was wrong, and yet, he gave in to them.

Why? I think in a word, it's fear. He feared the people more than God. That's what I think it boils down to, doesn't it?

And so likewise for us, we sometimes sin, don't we, when we fear others more than God. We care more about the opinion of others at work, at school, in our community, and so we keep quiet, and we go along with things.

[7 : 16] We do that because we fear them more than God. Now interestingly, I think Aaron gets off rather lightly. He's not too harshly judged for it, and I'm not too sure why.

But all of it makes a mockery, doesn't it, of God's good design for them. God had promised them his presence in the terminal. Just think about this. God was going to be with them, and they were meant to contribute this goal to the building of the tabernacle, and instead, what they do is use it for this golden calf.

There's this magnificent image of God coming down in the cloud and being with them, and they substituted for an idol in the form of a mere beast. It's a calf.

It's not even a magnificent eagle or a lion or whatever. It's a calf. It's a cow. What an insult, don't you think, to represent God like that.

And then look what they do. They offer burnt and fellowship offerings to it. These were the very same offerings that God was going to instruct them to offer to him so that he could make them holy.

[8 : 30] You see, so much of idolatry is just a pale imitation, isn't it? The cheap fake for the real thing. C.S. Lewis quotes like this, and some of you would know this, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition which are idols when infinite joy the true thing is offered. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. God gives us the real deal in himself but we settle for idols. And that's what the Israelites did.

The one who brought them out of Egypt, the one who showed with his mighty hand overcoming Pharaoh with the plagues, parting the Red Sea so that they could walk across safely and yet what do they do now?

They bow down to this golden calf and say, this is the God who brought us out of Egypt. What a travesty.

[9 : 47] But you see, they are not just throwing away this true blessing that they have in God, this real deal and going for a fake. What they have done as well is to put great strain on God's covenant with them.

Almost to the point of breaking. That's what their sin has done. And so as a result in verse 9, if you go back there, God's anger is rightly kindled.

I've seen these people, the Lord said to Moses, and there are stiff-necked people. And that phrase is going to turn up again over the next couple of chapters. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I might destroy them.

Then I will make you into a great nation. Then in verse 19, we see symbolically the impact on the covenant. Moses comes down from the mountain with the tablets in hand and in fact, in those verses, we see it described as the very writing of God on the tablets.

And what he does is he throws them out of his hand, verse 19, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain and took the calf the people made, burned it in fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on water and made them drink it.

[10 : 53] And then in verse 25, we get words that truly describe the disgrace that Israel has brought on themselves. It says, Moses saw that the people were running wild.

That's like a description of animals, isn't it? And that Aaron had let them out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. One comment said that as I was reading, describe this as tantamount to committing adultery on your wedding night.

Imagine that. It's like a father, that's another example, who sells all he has to put up bail for his son, but once released, the son ignores him and turns back to his crime or to his friends.

Or it's when perhaps you, you make sacrifices for someone you love, a friend, only for them to turn around to stab you in the back. That's what Israel has done to God with their idolatry.

And so faced with this rebellion, God has no choice. He has to respond with righteous judgment.

And so verse 26, Moses stands at the entrance and said, whoever is for the Lord, come to me.

[12 : 02] All the Levites rallied to him. Then 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.

The Levites did as Moses commanded. And that day, 3,000 of the people died. Then 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.

Now, interestingly, I think what this suggests is that not everyone was involved. The Levites, certainly weren't. And perhaps only the 3,000 that were killed that day were the instigators of this whole mess.

Perhaps the rest were just bystanders. We don't know. Even so, I think a lot of people read this and they feel like this is too harsh. But really, I think it gives us a picture of what holiness means to God. Sin and idolatry are serious to God. When God rescued them, it wasn't just to free them from slavery physically, but it was to call them to himself as a holy people, faithful, righteous, holy, set apart for him.

[13 : 14] And that's why the Levites who stood apart that day, even against their own brothers and sons and all that, they were blessed that day because they were set apart, made holy to the Lord.

God. Now, I don't think God takes any pleasure in all this killing, but that's what Israel's own sin has brought on themselves. That's what sin brings onto ourselves.

And if you think God is too harsh, then I'm afraid, perhaps, you may need to think about whether you've truly understood God's character and what holiness means.

Now, having said all that, we might think that the whole focus of this passage is on that judgment. But actually, I think if we do, we lose sight of what the real issue is here. You see, it's actually not first and foremost about God's judgment on Israel, but rather how this sin puts God in a terrible dilemma.

You see, this idolatry has raised the real challenge of how God can stay true to his character in all of this. See, on the one hand, God's righteousness requires his judgment.

[14 : 24] We know that. That's consistent with his character. But so is God's faithfulness to his word. That's also part of his character. He keeps his promises, and in particular, to Abraham, Isaac,

and Jacob.

And so, what we see along through the whole passage, right from the beginning almost, in verse 10 and 11, is this dialogue going on between God and Moses in relation to this point. Moses sought the favor of the Lord, his God, in verse 11.

Lord, he said, why should your anger burn against your people whom you brought out of Egypt? Why should the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains, to wipe them off the face of the earth?

Turn from your fierce anger, relent, and do not bring disaster on your people. And then, how bold of him to say, 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 promise, and it will be their inheritance forever. And so you see, almost, that the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

[15:33] Almost as if he has that anger and then he remembers his promises and it's sort of like, oh. And this dialogue happens while Moses is still up in the mountain, doesn't it?

In verse 10, it's a direct response to God who has just announced his intention to destroy the nation. But Moses dares to point God to his promises and say, this is your character.

You promised. Now, I don't mean to say then that God had somehow forgotten all that he had promised. You know, as if, oh, thank you Moses. Thanks for reminding me.

No, all Moses has done is merely vocalize God's thoughts so that there can be a dialogue to go on. But we see through it, don't we, the dilemma God has been placed because of Israel's sin.

This is a headache for God. And now, initially, God's promise was to bring fulfillment through Moses. So he says, okay, that's fine. I will make you, Moses, into a great nation. That's how I'm going to do it.

[16:32] And you have to think, this is not without precedent because God did choose Isaac and not Ishmael. He did choose Israel and not Esau. So God is able to fulfill his promises by blessing some of Abraham's descendants, not all of them.

And yet, we find in Moses a selfless mediator. I don't know what, how would you feel if God said, I'll make you a great nation? That's a tantalizing prospect for Moses, isn't it?

Just keeping that blessing to himself. But he doesn't do that, does he? Rather, he's concerned for all of Israel, for all of his people. And what's more, he's also concerned for God's reputation.

And he says, the Egyptians will accuse you of evil intent if you do that. And this selfless mediation, we continue to see in verse 30, when Moses promises to mediate for the people.

He says that, you have committed a great sin, but now I will go up to the Lord, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin. And so Moses went back to the Lord and said, oh, what a great sin these people have committed.

[17:41] They have made themselves gods of gold, but now please forgive their sin. But if not, then blot me out of the book you have written. Now Moses, of course, he's been talking with God, hasn't he, on the mountain about atonement, how the sin offerings can be offered for that.

But even though Moses here hasn't sinned, yet he chooses to identify with the sins of Israel, doesn't he? He's saying, God, if you won't forgive them, then don't forgive me either.

Blot me out with them. He's not, he's chosen not to take up God's offer of the great nation that he could have become, but rather to be counted with his people, Israel.

Now this to me is the right way to identify with God's people. A godly person who nevertheless stands with the weakness and flaws of his people. And I think there's a contrast here, isn't it, between Moses and Aaron because Aaron, actually he identifies with Israel as well, doesn't he? But what does he do? He identifies by going along with their sin. And it's deeply ironic, isn't it? Because who has God appointed to be the first high priest of Israel?

[18:50] The first one to offer sin offerings on behalf of the people? Aaron. This very person God has chosen and yet the very first thing he does is fall so far short of what God requires of him.

And yet I think even though Moses is a good and godly person, he's not God's chosen mediator, is he? But God rejects his offer in verse 33.

He says, whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out in my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.

And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made. God will decide who is forgiven and how their sin will be dealt with.

And so the answer to that dilemma is eventually found, as we all know, in his son Jesus who came down and laid down his life, who identified with sinners just like Israel and us, whose name was blotted out from the book of life, wasn't it?

[20 : 00] Even though it's only for three days so that we could be saved. He was punished, not for his own sin but ours, so that we could be forgiven instead.

And so, although this dilemma is created here in Exodus 32, God looks forward, doesn't it, ultimately to his son to have this dilemma resolved between how he will maintain his holiness and still be faithful to his word.

God in Christ, God in what Christ done, is able to be faithful to his word and so bless sinners like Israel and sinners like us and still justly deal with sin and maintain his holiness.

And that's what the cross of Jesus represents, doesn't it? God's grace and justice both in the one event. and that's why for us, the cross as Christians is central to our faith.

Without it, God's character is compromised. God fails to be God. And as Christians, we rightly emphasize the grace of God. That when we preach the gospel, we say it's the free gift of salvation for those who repent and turn to Christ because in Christ, God can be faithful to his word and still maintain his holiness.

[21 : 17] But the Bible also warns us that even though we don't have to be good to be saved, we shouldn't take this gift of salvation for granted. Christ's death doesn't lessen the gravity of sin.

In fact, I think it merely highlights us how serious it is. And to do so, to take it for granted would be to do as the Israelites did. And that was our reading from the New Testament tonight from 1 Corinthians 10.

Because Paul there says that although they were rescued from Egypt, although they passed safely through the Red Sea and they were bound for the Promised Land, i.e. they were saved, yet God wasn't pleased with most of them and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

And the warning for us is what Paul writes in verse 6. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

And in particular, there is a warning for us not to be idolaters in verse 14. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.

[22 : 23] John Calvin said the human heart is an idol factory. And that's true, isn't it? We're all prone to turn away from the true and living God to seek our worth, our security, our satisfaction in other things.

Now, what does it mean here to flee idolatry? Well, I think it's just this flip side of saying cling to Christ instead. Cling to God. That is, whenever we fail, whenever we do things that are wrong, throw ourselves back on the cross of Jesus.

Put our faith in Him and don't be tempted to look elsewhere. And I think the danger lies at both ends. So, when things go wrong, when there's a crisis and we suffer, maybe we have an illness, physical or mental, or we've made mistakes or our relationships fail, there is a temptation there, isn't it, to turn to other things to find satisfaction.

But I think it also works, or there's also a temptation when things are going well, when you've had success and you're feeling good about it. There is a temptation there, isn't there, to look to those things as idols, to think, oh, those are the things that make, give me security or give me success or give me the satisfaction that I want.

So, whether it's triumph or tribulation, we need to respond by being aware of those dangers of turning to idols at those points.

[23 : 52] And for us as Christians, it's sometimes harder to spot, isn't it? Because we don't have a golden calf right there that's screaming out to us, look, I'm an idol, worship me.

That's not our idols, is it? Rather, our idols are a bit more subtle, aren't they? It's things that are good that God may have given to us as gifts, but then we even turn them into things that we find ultimate satisfaction in and security.

And the warning signs, though, are similar, aren't they? Impatience at waiting for God to answer is one warning sign. Doubting His word and promises, that's another.

Fearing humans more than God. The same ones that we saw at the very start, aren't they? But when we see these warning signs, then our resolve should be to pray that God will give us the

strength to keep trusting in His word, to keep clinging to His Son Jesus with a pure and humble heart so that we will not fall into idolatry but flee from it.
Let's pray. Father, forgive us for our hearts are prone to idols. Help us to see when we have done that. Teach us to flee idolatry in all its guises.
[25 : 11] Give us a heart that is wholly given to Your Son Jesus, trusting in Him and finding our hope only in Him. In His precious name we pray. Amen.