

# The Golden Calf

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[ 0 : 00 ] The question we put on the screen before was the one I'll ask you again now. If I was to ask you how many different gods do the people in Melbourne worship, there's probably quite a few.

There's the main ones. And so there's the God of Islam. There's the Hindu gods. There's the Buddhist view. And, of course, there's our God. They're the four big ones.

But there's also idols as well. People worship idols such as money and houses, esteem. People worship the environment or ideologies. People worship themselves and their children.

And, of course, there might even be those people who worship statues. And that is what's going on in our passage today. It's the famous story of the golden calf. Israel took gold, made a statue of a calf, and then bowed down and worshipped it.

And God was very, very, very angry. And I was trying to figure out this week why it was such a scandal. And as I read the opening verses, see what stands out to you as the most shocking thing.

[ 1 : 06 ] This is verse 1. 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.

And Aaron answered them, Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing. Bring them to me. So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they had handed 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. I wonder what stood out for you as the most shocking thing. Firstly, they broke their covenant with God.

And commandment number one says, You shall have no other gods before me. But here they are with a golden calf. Their ability to remain faithful is hopeless.

But what's also scandalous is that they only agreed to the Ten Commandments just a few weeks ago. Verse 1 says, Perhaps for you the real shock is verse 2, what they did with their earrings.

[ 2 : 22 ] Do you remember what God wanted them to do with their gold last week? It was for the tabernacle, wasn't it? For the ark and things like that. It was meant for the center of their worship. But verse 4 says, Do you remember in the Ten Commandments we talked about commandment zero?

I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt. The foundation for their relationship with God, their privilege in the world, was that God was the one who brought them up out of Egypt.

But in verse 4, who are they giving the credit to? These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. Their behavior is so outrageous that Moses smashes the Ten Commandments, the tablets of God's word, just as they had smashed their relationship with him.

Golden calf is such a low point in the Bible that by the end of the story today, things are still not properly resolved. And so, how did they arrive in this place?

Do you really think they forgot that it was Yahweh who brought them up out of Egypt? Are their memories as bad as their loyalty? Perhaps there was too much Egypt in them, the place they came from.

[ 3 : 45 ] You know, a country that had lots of little gods in statues like animals. Or is something else going on? Look at verse 5. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced tomorrow, there will be a festival to the Lord.

Did you catch that at the end there? Their festival was to the Lord. You see, it looks like a calf to us, but to them, they're worshipping the Lord. They've named their calf Yahweh.

But the second commandment already told them what he thinks about things like this. The second commandment says, You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven

above or on the earth beneath, such as a calf, or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them. You see, on top of the mountain for the past six weeks, God has been telling us what he's like. But at the bottom of the mountain, they decided to redefine him according to their own ideas.

And for them, they preferred to see Yahweh like a calf. Verse 6, the people rose up early, sacrificed burnt offerings, presented fellowship offerings to this calf.

[ 5 : 00 ] As the day went on, verse 6, afterward, they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. That is a Bible euphemism for, there's no nice way to say this, but for a drunken orgy.

You see, it turns out that their version of Yahweh doesn't mind the odd bit of idolatry, the odd bit of adultery, the odd bit of coveting your neighbor's wife.

Instead of ten commandments, their version of God has only about, say, seven or so. They thought he wouldn't mind if they turned him into a golden calf.

No, that's what the second commandment was all about. They thought he'd approve of their wild and drunken party. No, the tabernacle was arranged with certain sections, a sacrificial system, because I care so much about sin.

We're not worshipping other gods, they would say. We would never turn away from Yahweh. But in sin, they just changed him to look different from what he told them he was like, until today, when he's totally unrecognisable and now looks like a calf.

[ 6 : 11 ] Do you see where this is going? If I asked the people of Melbourne, how many different gods do you worship? The answers would be, you know, lots and lots. But if I was to go amongst the churches and say, how many different Jesuses do you have?

They'd all say, oh, only one Jesus. But golden calf shows that God's people are prone to redefining him into a version of their own choosing.

And that is scandalous. Because for 32 chapters, God has been telling Israel what he's like. He rescued them. So the whole world would know, in fact, that he is the Lord.

The Ten Commandments, the law, the tabernacle, they all show us his likes and his dislikes. He wants people to know him. But Israel tried to redefine him into something different.

Until today, he's totally unrecognisable and now looks like a farm animal. Did you ever wonder why they chose a calf? Did you ever wonder that?

[ 7 : 15 ] If you were going to design your own god like the kids did, would you choose a calf? I was thinking about this. I'd probably go for a lion, you know, strong, a bit ferocious, proud, all that sort of business.

Maybe you'd choose a horse. I was trying to think, what are the noble animals? Is an elephant noble? I don't know. Maybe. Is that? Anyway, there it is. Elephant. I don't know what animal you would choose to make a god out of.

But the calf is no accident. Because three times in the passage, God calls this people stiff-necked. Stiff-necked is a characteristic you find in stubborn animals that won't turn to follow your direction because of their stiff-necks.

In verse 25, the author says they're running wild and out of control. A few times, God says to Moses, you'll be the one that has to lead them up to the promised land, just as you'd lead a farm animal.

You see, in their idolatry, they've stopped looking like people and begun to look like little calves, out of control, wild farm animals.

[ 8 : 21 ] And instead of conforming to be like Yahweh, they've tried to make Yahweh look like them. A little calf god for a nation of wild and out of control little calves.

Another explanation comes from the idea of creation. You see, all people were created in the image of God. But as they overturn his place in their lives, they overturn themselves and are de-created.

A New Testament reading, which Elaine brought to us on the screen, please. Although, this is Romans 1. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being, birds and animals like a calf and reptiles.

Next slide. Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

Dehumanized they are. Once they were God's treasured possession, but now they've been given over to their sinful desires. Once they were a kingdom of priests, but now, verse 25 says, they've become a laughingstock amongst the nations.

[ 9 : 41 ] They were de-created, once made in the image of God, but now de-created and looking more like an animal instead. As they overturn God's place in their lives, so too they overturn all of his good effects, the things that he has done for them, even making them in his image.

You see, instead of conforming themselves to be like God, they've tried to conform God to be like them. A calf God who approved of their wild and out-of-control behavior.

And so, obviously, he's not happy with that. Anyone whose version of God doesn't get angry hasn't really read Exodus 32. In fact, God is so angry that by the end of the story today, things are still not resolved.

Look at verse 7. He said to Moses, go down because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

Do you see what he's saying there? How he's disowning them? Your people are no longer my people. His verdict, verse 9. I have seen these people, the Lord said to Moses, and they are stiff-necked, like stubborn farm animals.

[ 10 : 58 ] And the consequences and the judgment for God's anger seem to go on and on and on. Verse 10. Now leave me alone, so that my anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them.

Then I'll make you into a great nation. Verse 20. Moses 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.

Verse 27. Moses forms an Israelite execution squad. 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 about 3,000 of the people died. It's an emergency situation for an emergency measure. The next day, Moses steps up in verse 32 to intercede for the people, and that is what they need, an atonement for their sin.

But now, please, Lord, forgive their sin. But if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.

That is an atonement, an intercession for their sin. It's what they really need.

[ 12 : 04 ] But even after that has happened, God is still angry, and things are not yet resolved.

Look at verse 34. 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. Verse 35. It says he strikes them with a plague. In the book of Exodus, a plague is what God reserves for his enemies, such as Pharaoh.

So it's clear that things are not yet resolved. That's how angry God is. And the reason why, I only figured this out at 1130 last night. The reason why goes back to the Ten Commandments.

On the screen, please. This is the second commandment. Shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in the heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Why? Because I, the Lord, Yahweh, your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

[ 13 : 10 ] You see, if they broke that commandment, God promised that there would be consequences and judgments on and on and on and on to the third and fourth generation.

And so while it seems that God is blind and out of control in anger, what he's really doing is just sticking to his word. In verse 33, verse 2, he's too angry to travel with them, but he'll still send an angel to drive the Canaanites out of the land as he promised.

In verse 33, he still calls them stiff-necked, but he'll still give them the land of milk and honey. Even in his anger, God remains faithful to his word, which is the one thing Israel didn't do when they made the golden calf.

But God is still angry all the same. They made a mockery of him. They took the worship that rightly belongs to him and gave it to a dumb farm animal instead.

Golden calf is one of the real low points of the Bible. Their relationship teeters on a knife's edge. I'm over the page in 33, verse 5. It says, God is deciding what to do with them.

[14:24] And so if you were God, what would you decide to do if Israel were your people? Would you give them another chance to know you rightly, even though you know they'll probably mock you again?

Or would you get rid of them again? Get rid of them, sorry, and start again with Moses. If I were God, I know what I would do with Israel, but we need to let him speak for himself.

That was the problem in the passage. Which is what he'll do next week. For now, God is still angry. Their relationship teeters on a knife's edge. And I think that tension at the end of the story is quite a good thing.

Because the tension there, the fact that things are unresolved in the relationship, it shows how much God cares for what they've done. It shows the gravity of their sin.

It shows how angry God gets when we throw away his words and construct our own versions of him. You see, if I asked the people of Melbourne, how many different gods do they worship?

[15:30] They answer would be lots and lots and lots. Fine. But if I was to go amongst the churches and ask how many different Jesuses do you have, they'd all say, oh, we only have one Jesus.

But some churches have a Jesus who is flexible, who is changing, who's happy to be led by our culture, who's evolved his thinking on the definition of marriage and human sexuality.

There are some churches whose Jesus tolerates casual sin, such as grumbling and gossiping, holding grudges, because after all, even Jesus hated the Pharisees.

There are some churches who don't bother with evangelism, because their version of Jesus will save everyone anyway, regardless of what they believe. There are some churches whose Jesus only forgives the really good people.

But for everyone else, he's got his clipboard out and he's marking us off, ticking boxes by the way we live each day. You see, the Anglican Catholic, uniting Lutheran, charismatic churches, they probably all say that we're united in Christ.

[16:37] But that's really tricky, isn't it? When we've all got different versions of Jesus. This is not a passage about idolatry per se, but about creating a Jesus of our own making, despite what he's told us that he is like.

At Golden Calf, they made a version of God that looked just like them. And so it seems that you become what you worship. You see, proper Christianity wants to be like Jesus.

It makes room for the Spirit's convictions. It takes seriously what God says in his word, that we will conform to be like the sun. You see, even though God calls us out of darkness, he doesn't want us as we are.

He wants his son. By the Spirit, he's slowly changing us to be like Jesus. But Golden Calf Christianity is stiff-necked and stubborn.

It resists the work of the Spirit. It resists his convictions about sin and says, No, God loves you just as you are. You don't have to change until your version of Christianity, your version of Jesus, ends up permitting everything you do, and you end up becoming the pinnacle of your own religion.

[17:53] Because surprise, surprise, your Jesus looks just like you. Does your Jesus speak and act like you? Does he vote? Does he approve of the same things you do?

Does he treat others just the way you do? Are you sure you're worshipping the real Jesus? Or one of your own making? The great sin of the Golden Calf was not merely idolatry, but making a version of God that looked just like them.

Because you become what you worship. The warning from today's passage is don't do it. God cares very deeply about his reputation. In Exodus, he's gone to great lengths so that everyone would know what he is like.

For us, we have a whole Bible. They only had the book of Exodus. We've got a whole Bible. It all points to Jesus. So we're not left wondering what Jesus is really like.

The book of Hebrews says this. Please, it says this. We Christians, we must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we've heard, that is, in the New Testament, so that we do not drift away.

[19:05] For since the message spoken through the angels, that is, the Old Testament, was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?

In other words, if the people who had the message of the Old Testament received a just punishment for their disobedience, how shall we escape if we've got both the old and the new? If we drift away from the real Jesus to one of our own making, we're also drifting away from the great salvation of God. The warning is don't do it. The anger for God will go on and on and on when you throw away the real Jesus.

Please come back next week to see how this is resolved. For now, the story ends with a bit of tension, and so we're going to end with a bit of tension as well. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that you show us clearly what you are like in your word.

[ 20 : 12 ] Thank you that all of the Bible points to the Lord Jesus. Please forgive us when we make Jesus look like us rather than the other way around.

Please would we, by your Spirit, change our lives to suit him and not the other way around. Please, Father, would we change the way we talk and think and act?

Please prompt us, convict us by your Spirit so that we look like Jesus and not like ourselves. Please chip away the parts of our old self that is still clinging to us.

trying to get a look in during the week. Father, please, by your Spirit, would we put off our old self and put on our new self made to look like the image of your Son.

Help us, Father, when we're tempted to make Jesus say things he doesn't really say. When we're tempted to make your words say things it doesn't really say.

[ 21 : 23 ] Please, Father, would we be humble enough to give you the space to speak for yourself. Thanks that the whole Bible is you talking to us and so that we're not left in any doubt.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.