THE GOLDEN CALF

Exodus 31:1-32:35

Key Verse: 32:32 “But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”

Romans 1:25: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.”

The Lord God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and led them at the foot of Mount Sinai on the way to the Promised Land. God made a covenant with them through Moses so that they could become a treasured possession of the Lord, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God had great hope and a plan for this people so that the whole world might be filled with the knowledge and glory of God. In order to be with his people, God instructed Moses to make a tabernacle, the tent of meeting so that he could dwell among them. Aaron and his four sons, who would wear the sacred priestly garments, had to be consecrated in order to intercede between God and them. They had to sacrifice two lambs a day regularly at the tent of meeting. This was how they met God and satisfied God’s requirement for them to become his covenant people.

The most important thing for them to do as the covenant people was to obey God’s word and to worship him only as the true living God. God established his covenant through his words with them. God said to them, “*Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then…*.” (Ex 19:5,6) God gave them the Ten Commandments as their law. Walking in obedience to God’s words guaranteed their security and prosperity. (Deut 5:32) The Lord is one. The Lord is God. There is no other. They had to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. God repeated the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy. Look at 31:12-13. “Then the Lord said to Moses, “***Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbath. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy***.” God gave the Sabbath as a sign between him and the Israelites. In the past God gave a rainbow as the sign of the covenant with Noah. (Ge 9:16) God gave circumcision as the sign of the covenant with Abraham. (Ge 17:7,13,19) Now God gave the Sabbath as the sign of the covenant with the Israelites. As the covenant people they had to keep the Sabbath holy. They had to remember their Creator God and worship the Savior God who brought them out of the slavery of Egypt. Today, going to church on Sunday is considered as the sign of being Christian. Regular church attendance on Sunday became the measurement to see whether one is a true Christians or not. The covenant people in the blood of Jesus worship the Lord Jesus and share their love with brothers and sisters on Sunday. Of course, true Christians carry invisible signs such as the love of God, faith in Jesus, the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and so on.

Despite God’s special grace and hope for them, the Israelites disappointed Him by worshiping idols in chapter 32. This incident is compared to Adam’s Fall in Genesis 3. It happened at the foot of Mt Sinai, where they had made the covenant with God. Moses stayed at the Mount for a long while because he had to receive God’s words. While the people were waiting for Moses, their patience ran out. 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***.” (1) What’s wrong with these people? Were they impatient? Of course! They did not remember that the Lord is the only true living God. They forgot their covenant. They abandoned their God. They wanted a visible leader instead of the invisible living God. Fear and anxiety came from the insecurity of desert life. They sought substitute gods who could ease their fear and anxiety.

How did Aaron respond to them? Before Moses left, he put all charge on Aaron. Crisis came during Moses’ absence. In this time of crisis, Aaron should have come to God and sought him through prayer. But he did not do so. Instead, he made a golden calf to satisfy the demanding people. He collected gold from them and made them into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. (4) Later he made excuses by blaming others, the people, Moses, and the golden calf. (22-24) When the people saw the golden calf, they said, “***These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.***” (4) When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and made an announcement for a celebration next morning. So, the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. (5-6)

The words “These are your gods” mislead us today, too. Satan misleads people through many counterfeit gods by saying, “These are your gods. Worship them!” What are the counterfeit gods of today? Timothy Keller answered in his book, “*Counterfeit Gods*”. They are romantic love (sex), financial prosperity (money), political success (power). If you date with Mr. Perfect or Miss Universe as your spouse-to-be, you may feel like you gained the whole world. They soon become your idols. But as the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 teaches us, human love is not all we need. The Samaritan woman changed her husband five times. This shows that human love cannot satisfy us and cannot quench the thirst in our soul. No human being can replace God, the source of eternal life. But Satan deceives us saying, “These are your gods.”

People think that money is everything and that money changes everything. Satan whispers, “Money is your god!” We need money. We can do many things with money. But there are many things we cannot do with money. Money is not everything. Yet people become a slave to money. The Bible says that greed is the root of all evilness. A calf is a young bull. It is the symbol of virility and power. The image of a calf was found in the Egyptian god, ‘Apis’ and in Baal among the Cananites. They are a metaphor for prosperity and success. When you visit Wall Street in New York, you will find a statue of a ‘charging bull’, which symbolizes the power of money. Satan whispers to us, “These are your gods. Money is your god.”

Sex, money, and power are modern golden calves. People add fun to the list of these idols. They are the followers of hedonism, who say, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” “Let’s party tonight.” But, Satan’s lie always leads them to death and destruction. Last week a college campus in NY completely shut down after 40 students were tested positive for COVID-19. They all joined a weekend party. The Israelites danced and ate and drank in front of the golden calf. ‘They indulged in revelry’ which means they were drunken and practiced immoral orgies and sexual play. People seek fun and pleasure because they are not satisfied with this world. Their sense of emptiness, loneliness, and meaninglessness demands more alcohol and drugs into their body.

Why do people make idols? Why did the Israelites make the golden calf? Idols seemed to provide them with security, safety, and prosperity. The Israelites were fearful and anxious about their uncertain future without Moses, so they made the golden calf. In ancient days, people had their own household gods who might protect them from their enemies or danger and bring them with prosperity. Even today, there are more than 8 millions house gods in Japan. They feel safe and secure by keeping idols in their house and carrying them on their body. Idols should be visible and tangible, something they can see and touch. They are made from stones and wood.

But invisible idols in our hearts are more dangerous and destructive to Christians. Tim Keller defines idols in his book, saying, “What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.” (*Counterfeit Gods*) He continues, “It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving ‘face’ and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry….An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’” According to Tim’s standard there is no one here who does not have an idol in his or her heart. If we love something or someone more than we do God in our hearts, they are all idols. We worship them knowingly and unknowingly, consciously and unconsciously. They are our hidden ‘golden calf’. These days my idol is sports. I spend more time for watching sports game than reading the word of God. I don’t worship sports, but my heart is more excited for sports than God’s work. Lord, have mercy on me! I will get rid of it. Help me! The Lord is our God. There is no other. The Lord God said, “*Hear, O Israel. The Lord Our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*.” (Deut 6:4,5)

The Israelites’ idolatry provoked God to anger. He called Moses and said that they became corrupt. They quickly turned away from the Lord’s command and bowed down to the golden calf. (7-8) Idolatry is one of the most detestable sins before God. So God forbids idolatry in his second and third commandments. The destiny of all idolaters is the second death (Rev 21:8). Idolatry is spiritual adultery. It is like following another man or woman, leaving their spouse. They are violating the marriage vow. The Israelites committed spiritual adultery. They violated the covenant with God by worshiping the golden calf. So now God wanted to divorce them. The Lord God had a reason to divorce the Israelites, because they followed other gods. God called them ‘a stiff-necked people’, which means rebellious and immoral people. (9) Then God said to Moses, “***Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation***.” (10) God’s plan for the people and his proposal for Moses shocked Moses. Moses appealed for God’s pardon and his reconsideration by bringing up three reasons: 1. He reminded the Lord of his special covenant relationship with his people (11). 2. He appealed to God’s need to keep his name holy and trustworthy (12). 3. He referred to the great patriarchal promises (13).

How did God respond to Moses’ appeal? He relented. Look at verse 14. “***Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.***” The word ‘relent’ means to ‘reduce harshness’ or ‘give in’. In other words, God changed his mind not to destroy his people or divorce them. In the bible there are three cases where God relented. God relented through intercessory prayer. When someone prays whole-heartedly, God changes his mind and plan. In the book of Amos 7, the Lord was about to send swarms of locusts and destroy the Israelites. At that time, the Prophet Amos cried out and said, “*Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!” So the Lord relented*. “(Amo 7:1-2) If you know someone who is sinning against God and going into destruction, pray hard for them until God relents. Your intercessory prayer will bring God’s mercy on them. Abraham’s intercessory prayer for Lot saved Lot’s life. God also relents when people repent. In the book of Jonah, God was going to punish the Ninevites. But when the Ninevites heard the message from Jonah, all people, from the greatest to the least, repented. They sought God’s mercy. Then the Lord relented. (Jonah 3:10). God relents when we repent of our sins from the bottom of our hearts and turn away from our sin. God also relents when he has compassion. In 2 Sa 24 King David sinned against God because of a census. David did not render all glory to God, but boasted his kingdom and power as if all things came from him. God humbled David through punishment. David had to choose one of three punishments, all of which were horrible. When God saw seventy thousand people die by plague, he relented. He said to his angel, “*Enough! Withdraw your hand!*” (2 Sa 24:15,16) We have to pray until God’s compassion arises. We must continue our intercessory prayer for others until God relents. Amen!

When Moses came down from the mount, he heard the sound of revelry. When he saw the people dancing before the golden calf, he was furious about their apostasy. He threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. What did he do next? Look at verse 20. “***And 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 to drink it***.” Moses fought against the sin of his people until the golden calf was ground to powder and they drank water with it. They drank ‘the golden raging bull.’ Like Moses, we must fight against idolatry until we erase even the mark of idols. This reminds us of Hebrews 12:4, which says, “*In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood*.” Moses did not stop at this point. Now he challenged his people as to whether they stood on the side of God or on the side of idols. He stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “***Whoever is for the Lord, come to me***.” (26) Idolatry is a matter of choice. It is the choice between God and the golden calf . Choose God between God and idols! God used the Levites who stood on the side of Moses to kill 3,000 Israelites who worshiped idols.(28) The people could not escape the sword of God’s judgment. Moses knew that they needed the forgiveness of sin. Without God’s mercy no one could survive because they had sinned against the Lord. So, Moses went back to the mountain to ask God for the forgiveness of their sin. (30) We will study about Moses’ compassionate intercessory prayer for his people next week.

Today we studied how the covenant people abandoned God and turn to their idols and how Moses interceded between God and them, and how the Lord God dealt their sin. We must remember that the Lord is our God, there is no other. Get rid of the golden calf from our heart! Worship the Lord with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength so that we may become the kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Amen!