

## The Golden Calf – Still Among Us

Exodus 32:15-28 (the incident of the golden calf at Mount Sinai)

### Introduction

1. Without a doubt, every child that ever attended Sunday School, one time or another, has been held in wide-eyed wonder by the story of the golden calf of the Israelites, and the wickedness at Sinai
2. The good versus evil in this particular story can be understood by even a four year old child, and it certainly is apparent to us grown-up Christians. Of course, we now live in a modern age where we don't have to worry about such sinful foolishness as golden calves! Or do we?
3. It is certain that you and I haven't melted down any earrings or gold bracelets lately to fashion a graven image. But in this day and age there are other kinds of "golden calves" to watch out for, especially taking into consideration that we, like the Israelites, are not yet inside the gates of Canaan.

### Today's Wilderness Journey

1. Let's put it in perspective. Embarking on the Christian life is the very parallel of the Israelites departure from Egypt, the fallen world. Like the children of Israel, we too face the journey across the desert to the "promised land," the Kingdom promised by Jesus so long ago.
2. Actually, this "desert crossing," our journey from the old world to the new, can be seen as being the change from an old self to a new self – from an Egyptian self to a transformed Canaanite self.
3. So the desert, or wilderness, and its challenges are necessary to a life of following God and Christ. The trials and tests of the desert (that time of growth after the initial Christian conversion and commitment) are our opportunities to reform old habits and attitudes (the self-centered "Egyptian" in us) to new Christ-centered, God-centered ways.

### The Enemy Within

1. While the Israelites face many tests in the wilderness, the golden calf incident was among the most powerful, because it didn't come from an obvious outside enemy or force; here, the enemy was within each person, from Aaron on down.
2. Let us briefly recount the incident (with some comments that will be important later on).
  - a) The Israelite camp is left alone by Moses as he goes to the mountaintop to fast and pray for 40 days. This is the time God wants to send His word to Moses and His people, a precious and historical moment.
  - b) The Israelites are put in a position to wait faithfully below, under Aaron's leadership. God gave them no previous of what He would send; He asked them to wait in faith.
  - c) After many days, the people become restless, even accusing Moses of deserting them. It was hard for them to endure this test of waiting.
  - d) The people ask Aaron to make them an idol; Aaron agrees and calls for all the gold in the camp. This is gold that God told the people to take out of Egypt for holy purposes, His temple, not idol making.

Aaron crafts an idol, wicked revelry begins in the camp, and when Moses returns with God's Word he is angered and punishes them.

3. How does this incident apply to us in our lives of faith, our "desert crossing"? (Here are main points; you may want to elaborate.) Looking again at the same four points above:
  - a) There are times in our own journeys of faith when God wants to teach us very important things. He doesn't offer His Words cheaply. Moses was asked to fast and pray 40 days for what God would give to his people. Such precious and historical moments come for us too.
  - b) It is precisely at those precious times, when God wants to teach us the most important new things, that he asks us to WAIT on Him, as He asked Moses and the people. The 40 days for Moses and his people were a time of setting a foundation for what God would give, a time of prayer and purification, a period in which to separate from old attitudes, to empty and cleanse their hands in readiness for God to put something new into those hands. It is the same with us: when God asks us to WAIT, we need to interpret prayerfully the reason and use the time for preparations. In reflection, we have no right, as fallen people, to demand from God on our terms, but are asked to accept His terms. (This is a good place for a practical example.)

- c) God tests us not because He doesn't trust us but because He wishes us to overcome the blocks to our faith, and make important steps ahead in our spiritual journey. The question is: Can we keep trust in God at those times when he asks us to wait, when He may be silent? The Israelites plainly failed with the calf, even accusing Moses of deserting them! Do you know someone who, tired of waiting for God's answer, has accused God of desertion or of not love?
- d) This brings us to the question of the golden calf. What are those golden calves that we must watch out for? Actually there are so many kinds! Just one point before we go on: remember in the story of the Israelites that first there is the sentiment that Moses has deserted them, and then comes the building of the calf. "If God won't take care of us we'll take care of ourselves." (A note: historians tell us that the golden calf was from Egypt, something that represented the old life of the fallen world, and the Israelites seem to go right back and embrace it after they have proclaimed Moses' failure.)
4. Our golden calves are generally the old fallen world habits, attitudes, and ways. What happens next after we have proclaimed God's desertion of us, His failure to love us? We tend to go right back to Egyptian thinking, feelings and actions. For some it might be starting to sink again; for another it may be sinking back into selfishness or one kind or another; in general it means that we again begin to misuse the life, value, energies, and talents that God needs to build His Kingdom, just as we did before in Egypt. How tragic for God and us!
5. Just as God told the Israelites to take the gold out of Egypt to use for His temple, He asks us also to redirect the use of our energies, abilities, and gifts from self-centered to God-centered purposes. Yet look how the Israelites misuse that precious gold. And observe the parallel in our own lives at times.
6. As Moses finally enters the camp, we see the immense disappointment and wrath. His people couldn't wait, couldn't prepare, couldn't accept God's terms, went back to the old ways. Then judgment falls.

For our conclusion, let us look at our own nation, and the role of our churches.

## Conclusion

1. America may not have pagan golden idols today, but there is another kind of paganism: the worship of self, and selfish lifestyles. This is our Egypt. How can God deliver this nation?
2. God can only deliver this country through a people of faith. But if we would be that people, we are asked to accept God's terms: to wait on Him, prepare for what he will give, and, most important, stop compromising with our own golden calves. If we are to be a people of God, let us BE fully a people of God.
3. Many, so many, are waiting for God to send His Son and His Kingdom at this time in history. But are we aware that before Moses comes down from the mountaintop we are asked to put our camp in order. Judgment may fall on this nation if we don't. It is in our hands. As we make our individual journeys of faith, let us remember as well that we are an historical people. What you and I do will determine what the church does.