



Week 7 The Golden Calf

Day 1 - Exodus 32:1-6

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took these from them, formed them in a mold, and cast an image of a calf, and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it, and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." ⁶ They rose early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being, and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel.

Understanding the passage:

You may notice that we've moved ahead in Exodus, passing over the chapters with the instructions for building the Tabernacle. The end of the book covers the actual construction of the Tabernacle, so we will cover all of that together next week. It is important to have that context, however, because today's readings pick up with Moses up on the mountain for a long period of time while he receives the inscribed tablets of the Ten Commandments and the instructions about the building of the Tabernacle.

Moses is away from the people for forty days and forty nights... long enough for them to wonder if he is ever coming back. Long enough for them to feel like they don't have a leader or mediator anymore.

They approach Aaron, Moses' brother, who has been left in charge, and tell him that they want him to "make gods for us, who shall go before us" since they don't know what has happened to Moses. Their request implies that they want gods who will replace Moses because they feel like he has fallen down on the job. They are feeling the loss of leadership and mediation and are confused

about what comes next. Asking for “gods who shall go before us” is a military term. They want protection and direction from gods who will lead them through their challenges.

Aaron complies, even though he knew exactly where Moses was. It could be that he was feeling the vacuum of Moses being gone as well. He asks the Israelites for their gold earrings – the same ones they got from the Egyptians when they escaped their bondage (Exodus 12:33-36). This is the gold that was supposed to be used for the building of the Tabernacle. The building materials for the purpose of worshipping God were used instead for worshipping a cheap imitation of god. The Israelites used a gift from God to create an idol for themselves.

The figure of the calf was commonplace in the cultures surrounding the Israelites. In Canaan, it represented the god Baal. But in their mind, they were not creating a different god to worship. In verse 4, Aaron says, “these are your gods *who brought you out of Egypt.*” The festival they hold the next day is explicitly held for the Lord, in Hebrew *Yahweh*.

If they are not introducing a new god, why do they do this? They were operating from fear and driven by an instinct to touch, control, and see the physical presence of God. They wanted reassurance, and instead of remembering the acts of God and the promises that God made to them, they returned to the patterns to which they’d be introduced in Egypt – that of creating physical gods to worship.

Questions for reflection:

1. The Israelites’ decision is made from fear of being left alone. Have you made a decision out of fear when you didn’t have all of the information? What was the result?
2. What causes you to forget God’s care? What helps you remember what God has done and promised to do?
3. Do you have the patience to wait when things seem paused? Does it change things when you know the person on whom you’re waiting can be trusted?
4. Have you ever used a gift from God to create an idol for yourself?

Day 2 - Exodus 32:7-14

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely;⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ”⁹ The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ” ¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Understanding the passage:

God sees what is happening at the base of the mountain and tells Moses to go down and control the people. God's anger burns at the disobedience of the people. It is not anger at apostasy, the abandonment of their beliefs in God, for God knows they have not broken the first commandment. Again, their worship is of Yahweh, but it's the form of the worship that angers God. Instead of trust, the people have made the building block of their relationship with God into something they can control.

God says to Moses, "they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them." The way that God commanded them is the first law in the Book of the Covenant. In Exodus 20:22-24, immediately after giving the Ten Commandments,

²² The Lord said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites: You have seen for yourselves how I spoke with you from heaven.²³ You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

God essentially told them, "you saw that when I spoke to you from heaven you didn't see my physical presence. So don't go making a physical presence for me." God wants them to be separate from the Canaanites who needed images and statues in order to conduct worship.

When God sees what is happening with the golden calf and the festival, God is prepared to destroy the Israelites. God tells Moses, "**Your** people, whom **you** brought up" are causing the problem and not only casts blame on Moses but creates distance between God and the people.

But Moses doesn't let God give up. Even though it looks like the relationship may be over with God and the Tabernacle may never be built, Moses leans in. Moses reminds God of the promises that were made to Abraham and his descendants. He reminds God that it would look weak for God to rescue the people from Egypt and then just turn away from them.

Because of Moses' words, God decides not to do what God originally said. This is reminiscent of Abraham pleading on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. It reminds us that God is not impassioned and doesn't turn away from the pleas of God's people. God has the capacity and right to do whatever God wants, but a critical part of the relationship with humanity is that God listens to prayer and petitions. God is for and with us.

Questions for reflection:

1. What is the actual sin involved in making and worshipping the golden calf?
2. At this point, what is the basis for the relationship between God and the Israelites? How does the golden calf impact that?
3. Do you believe God listens to your prayers? How does that belief, one way or the other, change the way you pray?

Day 3 - Exodus 33:1-3, 12-23

¹ The Lord said to Moses, "Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' ² I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the

Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

¹² Moses said to the Lord, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, please show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider, too, that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴ He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵ And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷ The Lord said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have asked, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸ Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” ¹⁹ And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord,’ and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” ²⁰ But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹ And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

Understanding the passage:

After Moses’ petition to God to not turn away from the people nor destroy them, Moses gets an affirmation that God will continue to lead them just as promised at Sinai. But it will look different than originally intended – instead of God’s presence going with them, God will send an angel to lead the Israelites. God tells Moses this is for the people’s own good, for God cannot coexist with their sin. It would cause them to be consumed.

Moses knows that God is right, for the people *are* stiff-necked, but he doesn’t relent to God’s new plan. Instead, he responds with frustration and honesty. He expresses that he is at the end of his rope and he feels like God is letting down God’s end of the bargain. He says, “You’re telling me to lead these people and that we are special to you, but you haven’t let me in on your plans. Don’t forget that these are *your* people and *your* responsibility. If you won’t take the lead, call it all off.”

What Moses is looking for is not just a stand-in for God, but for God’s actual presence. It is only because of God’s presence that the Israelites were able to escape from the Egyptians and survive in the wilderness. It is God’s presence that sets them apart from everyone around them. It is the thing that they need most in order to survive and be successful in reaching the Promised Land.

God first relents in verse 14, but Moses keeps pushing for more. That is because in Hebrew, the word “you” is singular. God promises to go with Moses. But Moses replies with “us.” In effect, Moses tells God that if God won’t go with all of them, then God might as well call the whole thing off because they will not be distinct from others and they will not survive. The thing that makes God’s people – the Israelites and us – different from the rest of the world is the awareness of God’s presence with us. Without it, we are lost.

Moses, possibly emboldened by God’s acquiescence, makes another request. Moses asks to see God’s glory. Moses is succumbing to the same thing his people struggled with – the need to see God. But in God’s grace, God grants Moses’ request. God says that when God’s goodness passes by, it will

be in grace and mercy. When we look for God's presence and glory, it is tempting to look for the power of thunder and lightning, but we should instead look for acts of grace and mercy among us.

God could have expressed anger at continually being questioned and challenged by Moses, but God responds with gentleness. It is clear that God can see and hear the anguish and exhaustion in Moses' voice. God doesn't overpower Moses, but meets his needs with tenderness. In this, God fulfills the promise of "being gracious to whom I will be gracious and showing mercy on whom I will show mercy."

Questions for reflection:

1. How might you describe Moses' relationship with God? How does the character of their relationship influence Moses' prayers? How does this compare to your relationship with God?
2. How is God moving in acts of grace and mercy? How can you attune yourself to notice God's presence in those things?
3. Have you ever felt God's gentleness with you when you've expressed frustrations with God?

Day 4 - Exodus 34:6-9

*⁶The Lord passed before him and proclaimed,
"The Lord, the Lord,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
⁷keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children
to the third and the fourth generation."*

⁸And Moses quickly bowed down to the ground and worshiped. ⁹He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, my Lord, I pray, let my Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

Understanding the passage:

When God grants Moses' request for presence, it comes in the form of passing before Moses and giving a self-description. God's attributes are omniscience (all-knowing), omnipresence (all-present), and omnipotence (all-powerful). But God doesn't emphasize those things. Instead, God focuses on character: merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiveness.

"Steadfast love" is translated from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is the Old Testament equivalent of the word for "grace" in the New Testament.

In verse 8, God says the iniquity of the parents will be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generations. How does that truth co-exist with the grace-filled nature of God that was just described? It is because God is gracious in forgiveness, but that doesn't mean that there are no consequences to sin. We suffer because of choices made by the generations before us, and equally, others will suffer because of choices that we make. This is not a cruel punishment, but the natural consequence of our actions.

If we choose to cheat on a spouse, it could result in the dissolution of our marriage. That will have consequences on our children's lives, and it could affect the way they parent their own children. God does forgive us for the adultery, but God doesn't immediately take away the negative effects of it.

Questions for reflection:

1. How have you experienced God's character as merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and forgiveness?
2. What are the words you would use to describe God's character?
3. Do you think it is just that future generations should experience the consequences of others' sin? Why or why not?

Day 5 - Exodus 32:15-19, Exodus 34:1-4, Exodus 34:27-35

32:15 Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. 16 The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. 17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." 18 But he said,

*"It is not the sound made by victors
or the sound made by losers;
it is the sound of singing that I hear."*

19 As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses's anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

34:1 The Lord said to Moses, "Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. 2 Be ready in the morning and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. 3 No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain, and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain." 4 So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.

27 The Lord said to Moses, "Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." 28 He was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. 32 Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. 33 When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face, 34 but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off until he came out, and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35 the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining, and Moses would put the veil on his face again until he went in to speak with him.

Understanding the passage:

The passages from chapter 32 depict what happened after Moses sees the people worshipping the golden calf: he throws down and breaks the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments on them. Though the tablets were inscribed by God and were a sign of the covenant, Moses shatters them. It is not because he has no regard for the covenant God has made; rather, he sees that the Israelites have broken the terms of the treaty and deems that the tablets he carries are worthless and might as well be broken.

After Moses reprimands the people and they experience the consequences of them turning away from God, the covenant is renewed and it is time for a new set of tablets to be made. In essence, it is like the renewal of marriage vows after one partner has gone astray.

God reaffirms this covenant with Moses on the mountain and tells him to write the words that God speaks. This time, when Moses comes down from the mountain – after another forty-day and forty-night excursion – he did not encounter the same scene as before. The Israelites had not turned away from God, had not tried to find a substitute mediator, had not forgotten God's promises. The Israelites are in the process of being transformed.

Moses is transformed as well. He is described with shining skin because he had been talking to God. When Moses first encounters God, he is a fugitive murderer from Egypt who is taking care of his father-in-law's herds because he doesn't even have any of his own. Now, he is the leader of God's people and the person who is chosen to be in God's presence.

Questions for reflection:

1. Moses throws down the tablets because he deems them worthless. But God didn't break God's end of the covenant. Were the tablets indeed worthless?
2. How does your countenance change when you're connected with God?
3. Can others tell when you are connected with God? If so, how?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think it felt like for the Israelites to be left alone for forty days? Do you think you would fall into the same trap?
2. Are you standing on tiptoes for anything right now?
3. Do you find yourself getting impatient after a short time when something doesn't happen as you think it should? Do you push through or give up?
4. What are the resources God has given you for worship that you have turned into an idol instead?
5. When do you feel like you need a God you can touch?
6. What do you think the difference is between God and the church? Do you ever confuse the two?
7. What do you make of Tom's statement: "Whatever... there are consequences. Whatever decisions we make in life, there are always consequences." Do you think that is fair?
8. Who is your Moses that reminds you that God is always there to forgive you and lead you back into relationship with God?
9. What is your biggest takeaway from this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: