

DEVOTIONAL 9



GOD IN OUR MIDST

EXODUS 32:1-9, 15-29, 35

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods 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 So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden 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 feast to the LORD." ⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸ They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden 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 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.

¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on 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 of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear." ¹⁹ And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

²¹ And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" ²² And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my LORD burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. ²³ For they said to me, 'Make us gods 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.' ²⁴ So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

²⁵ And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), ²⁶ then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. ²⁷ And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" ²⁸ And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. ²⁹ And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day."

³⁵ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

DAY 1

EXODUS 32:1, 7-8

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods 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.”... ⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸ They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden 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!’”

What is your comfort food? Mine is BBQ. Usually burnt ends, but really anything smoked for a decent amount of time with a little salt and pepper and a lot of barbeque sauce will do. Perhaps a better question is, why do you seek comfort food? For me it reminds me of home. A place where I feel safe, known and gives me the illusion that I am in control over everything happening in my life. It's where, for a moment, I can trust in the things that I see, namely food that will satisfy me.

Israel was presented with a moment like this (and, let's be honest, it wasn't the only time). They were in a place of discomfort, and looking for a way to comfort, from somewhere. While Moses, their leader, had been gone for forty days, they were left wondering, who are we, why are we here and where are we going? Of course all of these were questions YHWH had answered for them before, yet in this particular moment they were looking and not seeing the answers again. So they built a golden calf. This statue or icon would represent a deity, a god they could look to who would (at least in their minds) answer some of their current questions.

Why do we turn to false idols?

- For identity. They help us clarify who we are to ourselves and the people around us.
- For purpose. They make us feel important, and as if we have something to live for.
- For meaning. They explain why we are where we are. They give us a story.
- For community. Others are worshipping this god, I'll worship with them.
- For ritual. They give us a practice that makes the belief feel and seem holistic to our lives. It's something we do as well.

There can be a lot of reasons why we would turn to an idol, like a golden calf. It doesn't even need to be physically present to be an idol, but it likely manifests as something seen sooner or later. Yet Jesus wants us to not live by the things we can see, or to live for them, but rather to live by faith in Jesus Christ our King (2 Cor 5:7). The Israelites recognize the error of their ways soon, and the Lord will dwell with them in the ark of the covenant. You and I have the Spirit who dwells in us and the Lord who works for us. The invitation is to put our trust not in what we see, because they will fail us, but in Jesus.

PRAYER

Father in heaven, today help me to live by faith and not by sight. Give me the leave to know you are present and that I can trust in you with everything. Thank you Lord for Jesus my King and the Spirit who dwells in me. Thank you Lord, I'm Jesus name Amen.

DAY 2

EXODUS 32:2-4, 6 25

² So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ... ⁶ And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. ... ²⁵ And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies)

The nation of Israel, having been freed by God’s interceding, mighty arm from hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt, was living in and walking around the desert. They had followed Moses through the Red Sea on dry land, another obviously divine intercession. They had assembled, in trembling awe, beneath Mt. Sinai, and heard God’s voice saying:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image...” (Exodus 20:2-4a).

The people were so scared by the thunder, lightning, sound of the trumpet and smoke on the mountain that they asked Moses to speak for them to God by himself and to tell them what God said. They said they would listen to Moses but didn’t want to die from the sound of God’s voice. Moses told them not to fear, that God was testing them so a holy, righteous fear might come upon them so that they wouldn’t sin. (Exodus 20:18-21)

The next chapters of Exodus recount how God gave Moses detailed instructions for what their life would be like as his people, and the Israelites said Amen:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 24:3).

Exodus 24 goes on to narrate an amazing encounter God, Moses, Aaron, and some of the elders of Israel had on top of Mt. Sinai.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank. (Exodus 24:9-11)

God had more to say to Moses, so again he summoned him:

Moses went up into the mountain of God. And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them”. (Exodus 24:13b-14)

Moses alone then received more instructions. God spoke to Moses of the office of priest, and referred to Aaron by name. He gave Moses many details of how to make the priestly

garments with precious stones and linens. These instructions then culminated in the chapter we looked at last week where God outlined his plans and process for making the tabernacle a place of beauty. He told Moses that he had called Bezalel to this work and had given him ability, intelligence, knowledge, craftsmanship, and most importantly, had filled him with the Spirit of God. (Exodus 31:1-11)

By now our hearts are likely breaking as we consider our verses for today and remember what was happening at the foot of the mountain. The Israelites had been miraculously saved from slavery, had heard God's mighty voice and pledged their obedience; Aaron had been given great honor, including a place at the feast with the very God, and he was given the responsibility to hear disputes.

Yet, when Moses's absence stretched on, very terrible things happened. As we saw yesterday, the people gave up on Moses, gave up on God, and asked Aaron for other gods. He asked for their gold and they eagerly complied, taking jewelry out of their ears, off from around their necks, off their children and putting it into Aaron's hand. Aaron takes the gold and fashions the golden calf. He had no special calling and equipping, no careful design instructions, no filling of the Spirit of God. This was not God's way. The people call the image *the gods who brought us up out of Egypt*. Verse 6 shows how they ate and drank and *played*, which I Corinthians 10:7-8 defines as sexual immorality:

Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did....

In the context of all the beautiful blessings they had received from God, we might want to shout, "Aaron, no, this is not the way to handle a dispute! People, no, how could you have forgotten God so quickly?" The devotional for tomorrow walks through how Aaron could have come to this action, and the devotional for Thursday considers what decisions the Israelites made along the way that led to these requests.

But today we are left with this: it's rather easy to see how the actions of Aaron and the Israelites were completely absurd. They pledged obedience to God, had amazing, intimate experiences of his presence and his saving arm, but when Moses was gone for a bit they fashioned a fake god, partied hard and called it worship to the true God. But *worship, to be true, must be based on a right perception of God. The book of Exodus emphasizes the importance of knowing God as he truly is, and not as we imagine him to be* (Wenham, Motyer, Carson, France, New Bible Commentary, p. 116.)

PRAYER

Lord, we read in I Corinthians 10:6 "Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." It's so easy to see how they misstepped. Would you show us our own blindness to your blessings, saving arm and goodness? Show us our disobedience and please forgive us. Reveal to us times in our own lives when we've been partying hard and calling it worship to you. Thank you for your compassion. Jesus, you lamented "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:27). We need that mercy today. Make us willing. Gather us under your wings. Forgive us. Fill us with your Spirit. Amen.

DAY 3

EXODUS 32:4-6

⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden 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 feast to the LORD.” ⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

To hedge one's bets is to avoid committing oneself in the face of a difficult choice, or to put it another way, to take action that will prevent loss if events don't pan out precisely as planned. In Exodus 32, Aaron is faced with a difficult choice. On the one hand, he has been given custody over the people of Israel while Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to meet with YHWH. On the other hand those same people are getting restless and looking for security that they can SEE while Moses is absent. So, as we have observed, Aaron fashions the golden calf reminiscent of the gods of Egypt. But look closely at today's passage and notice how Aaron hedges his bet by building an altar in front of the calf and proclaiming a feast to YHWH -- utilizing the type of offerings YHWH had instituted. A little of Egypt AND a little of YHWH, what could go wrong?

Well, as we know, a lot goes wrong both for Aaron and for the Israelites, for YHWH is a jealous God and does not tolerate “a little Egypt.” But what we are invited to consider is that Aaron's attempt here to hedge is something that is not unique to him, but rather is near and dear to the heart of humanity. Consider the way that God invites us to cast our cares on him (cf. I Peter 5:7), which we do in prayer, but then we make sure that our bank account is flush and our prospects are taken care of. Or consider the promise that at God's right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11), yet we make sure that our pleasure meter is full through all sorts of experiences, trips, etc. . . Or perhaps it works the other way for you. Perhaps you are pretty firmly immersed in “Egypt” partying, living a hedonistic, get-it-while-you-can, lifestyle, but just to be sure, you attend the occasional church service, give to the poor, say a few prayers.

We all have a little Aaron in us.

So where do we turn? First of all, as we have been saying, Exodus 32 is God's kindness inviting us to acknowledge our divided hearts and repent. God says through Jeremiah that his people have turned to broken cisterns that cannot satisfy (cf. Jer. 2:13). Your idol will never be enough, It cannot satisfy. As we will see in future weeks Israel strips off their jewelry as a symbol of their turning from idolatry (cf. Ex. 33:5,6) Second, the invitation is to turn (again) to him. It is our undivided heart that YHWH asks for. The good news is that he is worthy of our undivided hearts. He is the one who can fully satisfy. He alone can and will truly care for us.

PRAYER

Father, you are worthy indeed of our undivided hearts, souls, mind and strength. We confess that we are more like Aaron than we would like to admit, always finding some way to hedge our bets, to accommodate both Egypt and YHWH. Thank you, Jesus, that your finished work has taken our undivided hearts and made them whole. Give us eyes to see as we follow you. In Your name we pray. Amen.

DAY 4

EXODUS 32:21-24

²¹ And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” ²² And Aaron said, “Let not the anger of my LORD burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. ²³ For they said to me, ‘Make us gods 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.’ ²⁴ So I said to them, ‘Let any who have gold take it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

The last several weeks we have been learning how YHWH was teaching the Israelites about himself and how He wanted them to live in community with each other. The central element of that teaching was the 10 commandments. It didn't take long for the Israelites to violate the 2nd commandment by creating an idol. At this point in the narrative, they have only been out of Egypt a couple of months.

We ask ourselves, “How could they do that?” Not only does the Exodus text explain, but we get additional insight from Psalm 106:6-15, Acts 7:35-43, 1 Cor. 1-8, and Heb. 3:7-19. Exodus 32 was a key passage for generations to come in getting the Israelites to understand the nature of sin and its devastating consequences. So what does it teach us about sin?

Sin happens when we get impatient with God. We're in trouble when we put him on our timetable or want to make Him fit into our plans. The Israelites decided that 40 days of waiting for Moses to commune with God was long enough. It's as if they didn't accept the fact that Moses was on God's timetable, and that His was the only timetable that mattered. Acting out of impatience only got them in trouble.

Similarly, they were impatient, in part at least, because they didn't trust YHWH. In spite of all they had seen in the past three months of God acting on their behalf and in their interests, they trusted their own experience and instincts more. They forgot what they had witnessed with their own eyes. We should pray for long and deep memories of God's work in our lives.

Sin is rebellion, plain and simple. The Israelites did what the 2nd commandment plainly told them not to do. This one idea is a part of all of the other texts mentioned above. It is in our natures to be rebellious, and the sooner we accept that fact the more we will understand some of the things we are prone to do.

Sin is compounded when leaders become passive and don't fulfill their intended leadership roles. Instead of telling the people that their idea was wrong in God's sight, Aaron went along with the rebellion and was in fact complicit in it.

Then like Aaron, after we sin, we have a problem accepting the responsibility for our wrongdoing. Sin clouds our ability to see the full implication of what we have done. At the same time we're prone to finding ways to blame other people or circumstances. Comedian Flip Wilson made a living in the 70's with a "The devil made me do it" routine. He could have gotten the idea from Aaron's response to Moses in verses 22-24.

PRAYER

Father, this passage should lead us to understand our need for confession. Help us to see our sins for what they are. Give us minds and hearts that are receptive as your Spirit leads us to these truths that scripture so clearly teaches. Amen.

DAY 5

EXODUS 32:19,20, 26-28, 35

¹⁹ And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.
²⁶ then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. ²⁷ And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" ²⁸ And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. ...
³⁵ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

One of the hardest parts of this chapter in Exodus that we have been looking at is the judgment that gets meted out to 3,000 of the Israelites. It is hard for our modern pluralistic sensibilities to conceive of death as being an appropriate punishment for mere straying of belief. Make no mistake, this is a hard history to remember and no amount of explanation will ever make it easy. Yet, surely, this is an important reminder to us of the consequences of heart rebellion against YHWH. Not only are the Israelites forced to drink the bitterness of their sin (vs. 20), which is an apt picture of our own dealing with the bitter effects of our own sin, but they also see that hard-hearted failure to repent in the face of God's holiness rightly leads to death. As Paul put it, the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). May we never trivialize even the minutest of sin.

However, there is more than a hint of the mercy of God here in this passage, mercy that can only be fully appreciated against the backdrop of his holiness. While we stagger at the loss of 3,000 souls, we look a little closer when we realize that it was all of the 2 million+ people who were involved in the sin (cf. 32:3). Here we see that though the sins were many, his mercy was more. This mercy is seen most clearly in Aaron. Aaron, as the blame shifting overseer of this adulterous, idolatrous horde, certainly deserved to be out of a job. Yet Aaron is forgiven. He is ordained and becomes Israel's first high priest. While he does not enter the promised land, he dies and is memorialized by the people (cf. Num 20), and he is forever honored in that role (cf. Ps. 133). Our sins, they are many, his mercy is more.

PRAYER

Use this song as a time of prayer:

His Mercy is More Keith & Kristyn Getty

*What love could remember no wrongs we have done
Omniscient, all knowing, He counts not their sum
Thrown into a sea without bottom or shore
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more*

*What patience would wait as we constantly roam
What Father, so tender, is calling us home
He welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more*

*Praise the Lord, His mercy is more
Stronger than darkness, new every morn
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more*

*What riches of kindness He lavished on us
His blood was the payment, His life was the cost
We stood 'neath a debt we could never afford
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more*

*Praise the Lord, His mercy is more
Stronger than darkness, new every morn
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more*

*Praise the Lord, His mercy is more
Stronger than darkness, new every morn
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more*