

You Shall Know I AM: The Golden Calf

Exodus 32:1-35

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 12, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ The morning's passage is meant to give readers a shock. **By the way the story of Exodus has been developing, you should be surprised at this blatant act of rebellion.** You would think, by this point, things have finally turned around for the people of God. Sure, they were slow to accept Moses as God's messenger. And they were slow to trust the LORD to rescue them from Egypt and to provide in the wilderness.
 - But they start to come around after God gives them the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. And then we're told in chapter 24:3, "*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."*"

- ❖ They're committed. All that he speaks, they'll do. Chapters 25-31 are then full of instructions for building a tabernacle and all its furnishings. Most importantly, the ark of the covenant, which functioned as the earthly throne of the LORD. **God's presence would rest on the ark, within the tabernacle, in the middle of Israel's camp.** If a community were to be told that God is coming to dwell in your presence, to take up residence in the middle of your neighborhood, you'd think that would generate excitement and motivate devotion.
 - Which is why chapter 32 starts with such a devastating blow. The people suddenly abandon the LORD, construct an idol, and call it their Deliverer (v8). **It's quite surprising. But it really shouldn't be.** If you read the Bible starting from Genesis, this is only the second book and yet there's already a pattern in place. We've seen this before. **It's not the first time a people blessed with the presence and words of God in their midst – would suddenly and surprisingly fall into idolatry.**

- ❖ Commentators have noted the similarities between Genesis 1-3 and Exodus 25-32. **Here in Exodus, there's a new creation narrative being told that follows a similar pattern.** The LORD's tabernacle is like a microcosm of his good creation. It's like a mini-Eden in the midst of chaos. It's a new garden where you go to be in God's holy presence.
 - It's been noted that the phrase, "*The Lord said to Moses*" occurs seven times in chapters 25-31 (cf. 25:1; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12). **So just like in Genesis 1, God speaks seven times, and in both instances, six creative acts culminate in a seventh-day rest.** The seventh occurrence of "*The Lord said to Moses*" is back in chapter 31:12, which we looked at last week.
 - **So Exodus 25-31 is essentially describing a new creation scene with a mini-Eden (the tabernacle) and a Sabbath rest.** It's Genesis 1-2 repeated. And this chapter, Exodus 32, is basically Genesis 3 all over again. It's a sudden fall again. That's why we shouldn't be surprised. We've seen it before.

- ❖ **The point here is that a pattern is being set, an example is being established.** If we fail to recognize it – especially if we fail to learn from it – we're missing the point of these passages. There's this place in the Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians where he references our passage and says it was written to serve as an example for us.

- ❖ Listen to **1 Corinthians 10:6–7**, “*Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. 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.”*” That’s from our text – that’s v6.
 - **Paul’s saying that this episode with the golden calf took place to serve as an example for God’s people of what not to desire.** Learn from this text *not* to desire evil as the Israelites did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were.
 - **Now we have to be careful not to moralize the OT.** The OT is not just useful for drawing out little moral lessons to apply to our lives. We need to read it in the context of the larger biblical story that finds its fulfillment in the NT in the person and work of Christ. And I’ll do my best to help you do that.

- ❖ But if the NT itself is telling us to read an OT story as an example of what not to desire and what not to do – **then it’s totally appropriate to ask what lessons we should learn from their example.** So this morning I’ve got four to offer. We’ll still try to understand them in light of the gospel of Christ, but nonetheless these are lessons to learn.

Human Sin Runs Deep

- ❖ The first lesson is: **Human sin runs deep.** That becomes painfully obvious when we consider what’s motivating these Israelites. We’re going to see that sin has layers to it, and you need to peel then back to understand how deep it runs.
 - **For these Israelites, they turn to Aaron, Moses’s brother, to make for them a god to go before them, to lead them like the LORD had been doing earlier.** But they’ve been camped out at Mount Sinai for almost forty days. They don’t know where Moses went. They want to get going, so they ask Aaron to “*make us gods who shall go before us.*” Now I think there are at least three layers of sin that can be observed. Sin is disobeying God, distrusting God, and defying God.

- ❖ **First, sin is disobeying God.** It’s a violation of his revealed will. The Israelites broke the first and second commandment. They ask Aaron to make them *gods* plural. It’s confusing since he only made one calf, and yet in v4 they say, “*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.*” So apparently they’re open to worshipping more than one god. Which is a violation of the first commandment: Thou shall have no other gods before me.
 - But they were also disobeying the second commandment, which forbade them from making a carved image of Yahweh. **Not only must they worship the right God, they had to worship him in the right way.** And that meant you can’t use images of God in your worship of God. That’s why there was an intentional blank space between the two cherubim on top of the ark of the covenant. **There was no carved image or statue sitting on the ark, the throne seat of God. Just a blank space.**

- ❖ But the Israelites didn’t want to direct their worship towards a blank space. **They wanted to see their gods, so they built the calf.** Now they didn’t think the golden calf was literally god. They saw it as a representation of the LORD. They still wanted to worship Yahweh. But they were more comfortable if he were visible. If they could see him whenever they wanted.

- ❖ That leads to the second layer. Sin is not just disobeying a law. **Sin is distrusting God.** It's more than a behavioral issue. It's a heart issue. Look at the Israelites. They were in a panic. Moses had gone up the mountain to receive more instructions about a tabernacle, a meeting place with God. But it's been almost forty days (24:18), and they hadn't seen or heard from him since. They're worried. Their sole point of contact with God appears to be lost.
 - And yet they're expected to still believe. To trust that the LORD knows what he's doing. That Moses, God's prophet-priest, also knows what he's doing. But it's hard to trust. It's much easier (and much more comfortable) to take matters into your own hands. **So instead of trusting and waiting for God to provide through his servant Moses, the people decide to build their own meeting place with God.**

- ❖ That's what this golden calf was meant to be. Just think of all the gold that was mentioned earlier in chapters 25-31 – as God instructs Moses on how to build the tabernacle and all its furnishings. Almost everything was overlaid with gold. **So when the people built a golden calf, they wanted this golden image to serve the same function as a tabernacle.** They were building for themselves a meeting place with God.
 - It's hard to wait on God. It's hard to trust his timing, to trust his designs. It's much easier to trust a god that you can see and touch, and let's face it, that means a god that you can manipulate to fit your timing and your designs.

- ❖ That leads to the third layer. Sin is disobeying. Sin is distrusting. **Third, sin is defying God.** Every time we sin, we are defying God's lordship, his kingship, his sovereignty and setting ourselves up in his place. Again, consider the Israelites. **They faced a choice – to receive the faith as God has revealed or to reconstruct it as they feel.**
 - All their actions can be interpreted as a reconstruction that stands in opposition to what God has revealed in his Law since they arrived at Sinai. There are some fascinating parallels. Look at v4. When the people say, "*These are your gods . . . who brought you up out of the land of Egypt,*" that parallels chapter 20:2 where Yahweh says, "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*"
 - When Aaron builds an altar before the calf in v5, that parallels the bronze altar to be placed before the tabernacle (27:1-8). When, in v6, they rise up early the next day to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings, that parallels chapter 24:4-5 where Moses does the same thing early in the morning to confirm the covenant. And when it says the people "*sat down to eat and drink*" (v6b), that parallels what the elders of Israel did when they ate and drank before God back in chapter 24:11. Those who didn't get to experience that are now fashioning their own image of God and hosting their own meal with him.

- ❖ And later when Moses and Joshua come down the mountain in v18 and hear the sound of singing, that parallels the last time singing was mentioned in chapter 15 when Moses and the people sang a song of deliverance after crossing the Red Sea. **So essentially what we see in chapter 32 is the people's attempt to recreate their entire Exodus experience.**

- ❖ The key difference is that instead of receiving the faith as revealed, they're reconstructing a faith as they feel makes the most sense. That's defying God, which is at the heart of all sin. This is what we mean by human sin running deep. **Our problem as sinners is not just that we break the law but that we try to remake the law as we see fit.** Whenever we struggle with obedience to God's Word, it's really a struggle with God's lordship – with his authority to tell us how to live. As sinners, we chafe at being told what to do.
- ❖ **That's what ultimately led the Israelites to fabricate a faith of their own making and craft a god in their own image.** This calf is a reflection of their own values and priorities. It says their God is strong and mighty. That's what a calf symbolizes. That's what they value.
 - And it's not like it's not true, but it fails to capture the full range of God's glory. No image can. That's why carved images are forbidden. **No created image of God can capture his infinite worth and perfection.** To try will inevitably lead to blasphemy. You'll end up with a false image of God – an idol.
- ❖ The seriousness of their offense explains why Moses throws the two stone tablets, containing the words of the covenant, on the ground, breaking them to pieces. That illustrates what the people just did – they broke the covenant. They defied the LORD. They tried to dethrone him. **Sure, on the outside, they were bowing to a golden calf, but on the inside, each person had ascended the throne of his or her heart and established a self-rule.**
 - According to Scripture, that's what it means to be a sinner. It means we don't just struggle with keeping the Law. It means we struggle with trusting and submitting to the Lawgiver. And we have a tendency to reconstruct our faith or even our image of God to fit our values and priorities. That's what sin is. That's how deep it runs.

Divine Wrath Burns Hot

- ❖ That's the first lesson we can learn based on the negative example of the Israelites. Now let's consider the example of how God responds to human sin and draw from that. Here's our second lesson: **Divine wrath burns hot.**
 - That's the very language used in v10. While Moses is still on the mountain, God informs him of what's happening down below. It's shocking to read God's words. Up to this point, the LORD has been calling Israel "*my people*" or "*my firstborn son*". But in v7 he tells Moses "*your people*" have corrupted themselves. Look at v9, "*And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."* **God is threatening to start over and make Moses into a new Abraham through whom he'll make a great nation.** God is angry, and his wrath burns hot against them.
- ❖ **Now I realize how offensive it can be to speak this way about God.** Usually, when you picture someone talking about God's wrath, it's some guy on the street wearing a sandwich board saying the world is going to end and yelling at everyone to turn or burn.

- When it comes to methodology, that would be the furthest away from my approach. **But when it comes to theology, there's no fundamental difference between what a street preacher says and what I'm saying because we're both affirming what Scripture says.** God's wrath burns hot against sin. That's what the Bible reveals.

- ❖ Now some people are going to reject this kind of teaching and deny that God ever gets angry with sinners. **They'll say, "That's not my God. My God wouldn't do or say that." But they're just describing their golden calf.** That's their projection of who God is – of who they want him to be. But it's not up to creatures to determine who their Creator is or what he's like. We are to receive him as he is revealed. But maybe that's the problem.
 - Maybe we have a hard time accepting this because we're not sure how God's revealed in Scripture and instead we're interpreting his wrath using our own experience. **But God doesn't get angry in the same way you and I get do. His wrath is different.** Our wrath is capricious and cruel. It flares whenever our ego is hurt.

- ❖ But God is different. **J.I. Packer** reminds us that God's anger is not "*the capricious, arbitrary, bad-tempered and conceited anger which pagans attributed to their gods. It is not the sinful, resentful, malicious, infantile anger which we find among humans.*"
 - He goes on to explain that that God's wrath is a function of his holiness. He writes, "*God's wrath is 'the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness'*". **In other words, wrath is the proper response of an absolutely holy God to the absolute unholiness of human sin.**

- ❖ You might prefer to worship a God of love who doesn't get angry – whose wrath doesn't burn hot against sinners. But just consider that you might be worshipping a golden calf and not the God who has been revealed. **In fact, I think it could be reasonably argued that God *wouldn't* be a loving God if he didn't get angry, if his wrath didn't flare up.**
 - If you saw blatant evil being perpetrated and causing harm to someone you claim to love – if you're not angry, if you don't feel wrath – then you don't really love that person. You're anything but loving. **Love cares enough to be angry with evil.**

- ❖ That makes sense. We want God to get angry with all forms of injustice, of racism, of misogyny, of violence. We want his wrath to burn hot over these systemic injustices. But we have to accept that the same God's same wrath burns over our private sins and indiscretions.
 - **Again, to pick and choose a God who gets angry over one sin and not the other – just shows that you're constructing a golden calf.** You're not dealing with the God as revealed. You're creating an image of God that fits your values and priorities.

- ❖ So yes God's wrath is burning here in this passage. But that's not really the point. **This episode is not meant to show how mad God can get – but how bad his people can be.** What would've surprised future generations reading the book of Exodus is *not* how God got so angry with this generation. **No, what would've surprised them is how God seemingly changed his mind.** He relented. How did Moses get him to do that?

Intercessory Prayer Changes Things

- ❖ That leads to a third lesson we can draw from this story. It should bring you great hope. **Intercessory prayer changes things.** If we look in vv11-14, Moses really starts to step into his role as a mediator. In earlier chapters, he was unsure about himself, questioning why God would choose him, asking him to send someone else. He was looking out for himself and didn't care so much for the burdens of God's people.
 - But here we see him finally stepping into his role as prophet-priest who represents the people before God. In fact, he's even starting to sound like God. **Notice how, in vv11-13, Moses is reminding God of the very realities that the LORD has been reminding all of them.** He's the One who delivered Israel from bondage to Egypt, for the expressed purpose of spreading the knowledge of himself. *"You shall know that I am the Lord."* (6:7; 7:5; 8:22; 14:4; 16:12; 29:46) That's been the refrain. God, if that's the purpose of the Exodus, then don't consume your people with your wrath. What would the nations think? Would they still prize your name, your glory?
 - **Then Moses reminds God of the promises he made to their forefathers.** To multiply them into a great nation and bring them into a Promised Land. For the sake of your reputation as a promise-keeping God, O Lord, *"turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people."* (v12).
- ❖ Now it would be a mistake to assume that God actually forgot. That he had a senior moment or that he was so mad he wasn't thinking straight and needed Moses to remind him of his purposes and promises. **No, I think the similarities in Moses's words and God's previous words is meant to show that the one who's really changing is not God but Moses.** Moses is maturing into the mediator he was called to be. Like a good priest, he intercedes for his people. He prays. He implores. And the LORD relents. Look at v14, *"And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people."*
- ❖ This is not a situation where God needed to be talked down from doing something rash. His anger is not a capricious, infantile anger that flares up to cloud his judgment. **No, God is not being talked down. But he is being talked to – wisely and boldly by someone who knows him well and knows on what basis to make an appeal.**
 - Moses appeals to the very thing that God appeals to when he tries to give his people hope – especially when we're overwhelmed with the depths of our sin and the reality of his wrath. **He appeals to God's faithfulness to his own purposes and promises.**
- ❖ That's how you talk to God. That's how you make a request. **You implore him to act based on what he says will compel him to action.** You try to move his hand based on what he tells you will move his hand. So is it really a surprise that God listened when Moses asked him to relent for the sake of his glory among the nation and his faithfulness to his own promises?
 - **If you've ever really prayed for someone, then you know that every intercessory prayer is an attempt to move God's hand.** You're trying to get God to move – to save someone, to heal someone, to change someone, to be merciful to someone. But you know that, in the end, you can't change a sovereign God's will.

- ❖ **But who knows – maybe his will was for your intercessory prayer to be that last straw that unleashes an avalanche of grace.** What if his will was for your prayer to be the very cause that moves his hand? I don't know anyone who really knows how to pray who isn't trying to change things. Moses certainly was. And by God's grace, he did. God relented and didn't consume all the people. But that doesn't mean he put it in the past and moved on. **He didn't let bygones be bygones. There were consequences for this rebellion.** People died.
- ❖ First off, Moses's anger burned hot like God's when he finally came down and saw their idolatry for himself. It says in v 19-20 that he burned the golden calf and ground it up into powder, mixed it with water and forced everyone to drink it. Then in vv21-24, he confronts Aaron who offers the lamest excuse. Look at v24, "*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.*"
 - And then, Moses calls all those who are on the LORD's side to come to him, and only the tribe of Levi come. And he commissions them to kill the guilty and about three thousand men died that day.
- ❖ That just goes to show that God truly did relent from the disaster he spoke of AND Moses's intercessory prayer truly did change things BUT that doesn't mean their sins were atoned for. The guilty still received their punishment. Sinners were still not pardoned.

Atonement Requires a Worthy Substitute

- ❖ That leads to our final lesson: **Atonement requires a worthy substitute.** There must have been some reason (not revealed to us) for why these three thousand men particularly died. Perhaps they committed more egregious sins summarized in that in that phrase in v25, "the people had broken loose". The NIV says they were "*running wild*". The KJV says they were "*naked*". So whatever was happening here, perhaps these three thousand were guilty of causing greater shame on the name of God, and they paid for it with their lives.
 - But Moses realized that the rest of the people were still on the hook. Their sins needed atonement. **Atonement is a biblical term referring to not just sins being forgiven but sinners being pardoned and reconciled to God.** The English word carries that idea of being reunified – to be restored at one with God. At-one-ment.
- ❖ **But unholy sinners cannot be restored at one with a holy God if our sin remains unpunished, if justice remains unserved, and his righteousness has yet to be vindicated.** Moses realizes that in v30, "*The next day Moses said to the people, 'You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.'*"
 - He goes back up the mountain to God and pleads for the people. And he offers himself as a substitute. He basically says, "Take me instead." Listen to v32, "*But now, if you will forgive their sin-but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.*" He's not talking about eternal salvation here. He's talking about the book of the living (Ps 69:28; 139:16). It's a biblical metaphor for our lives. To be blotted out is way of saying to die. **Moses is asking God to take his life as a substitute for the lives of the people. He tries to atone for sins by means of a penal substitution.**

- ❖ But God says, "No thanks." He rejects Moses's offer. **Not because it would be inappropriate for a substitute to bear the guilt and experience the punishment on behalf of others. According to God, there's nothing cruel or unjust about that.** In fact, that's at the heart of the gospel and all of us need someone to do just that for us.
 - **But God rejects Moses's offer because Moses is not worthy to be that substitute.** He has his own sins that need atonement. So atonement for their sins was not made that day. God says he will visit their sins upon them. And in v35 he even sends a plague that likely took more lives.

- ❖ The chapter ends at a low point. It began with a shock and it ends just as shockingly. God didn't allow their sins to be atoned. But remember, even we try to learn from the Israelites and their example, we still have to read this story in light of the larger story of Scripture.
 - **Because even though Moses was rejected, another prophet like him came in the fullness of time and served as that worthy substitute.** Jesus offered to be blotted out in our place, and God accepted. He died for sinners and made atonement for their sin. And if you personally trust in him, as your Substitute, then your sins are forgiven. You are pardoned, and you're restored at one with God.

- ❖ So even though we can appropriately draw lessons from Exodus 32, in another sense, this chapter is no longer applicable for those who are in Christ. **Because God is not angry with his children. His wrath does not burn hot against his Church.** Not because we're perfect. And not because he has soften up and changed his attitude towards sin and idolatry.
 - No, it's because the Mediator that Moses simply could not be – no matter how good his intentions – that Mediator has come. That's the existential question all of us have to face: **When I die, do I want to face a holy God on my own merits OR do I want a Mediator by my side?** One who pleads for me, who offered his life in my place. What is your relationship to Jesus? He's a worthy Substitute – but is he yours?