

THE EVENT OF THE GOLDEN CALF (8)

Exodus 32:1-34:35

Key Verses: 32:13,14

"Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'
Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."

As we studied last time, God gave his people the Ten Commandments, the law of God, in the hope of raising them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me." The second commandment says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol...." But while Moses was on the mountain with God, the people made a golden calf and began to worship it, breaking the first and second commandments. God was brokenhearted. Moses prayed with a broken shepherd heart. Then God remembered his promise to Abraham. God relented and did not bring on Abraham's descendants the disaster he had threatened. God worked through his servant Moses to discipline his people severely. And through this tragedy God raised a remnant of men who obeyed him fully and became a model for a kingdom of priests. In this lecture we learn that God does not give up hope for his people, but bears with them in spite of their incorrigible sins. And we learn the shepherd heart of Moses who prayed for his people.

I. The golden calf (32:1-10)

First, the people's low desire. Look at 32:1. "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, 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.'" How could these people forget God's mighty hand in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, and the bread provided for them in the wilderness? How could they forget God's hope for them and become slaves to low desires? It was because a slave mentality was lingering in their hearts in place of the glorious word of God. Also, the seed of a rebellious mind grew and grew. They had no spiritual quality, so they could not believe in God whom they could not see. They wanted to make a god whom they could see with their eyes. Strangely, though, they wanted a god. Probably they felt restless without something to depend on. But, in truth, they did so because they were made in the image of God, so they could not completely ignore God. As a result, they made an idol in the shape of a golden calf as a substitute for God. The Israelites could believe in God and live according to his teachings as long as Moses was with them. But when Moses left them for a while, they

lived according to their sinful nature. So they asked Aaron to make them a god they could see. Furthermore, they wanted to worship that god by eating and drinking and partying. When the Israelites ignored God they were controlled by the desire to worship an idol. So they made an idol, investing their valuables in it. What is an idol? An idol is something one likes most when he is controlled by his sinful desire. These days there are so many people who know God, but they rather make their own idols and live according to their sinful pleasures. There are many people who attend worship service on Sunday and on all the other days live like party animals, holding an idol in the corner of their hearts. This was the reason the Israelites made an idol and enjoyed an animal party.

Second, Aaron, a man of no backbone. Aaron had been left in charge in place of Moses. Aaron had depended on Moses rather than on God. As a result, he was afraid of the people, so he began to compromise with them. If only he could keep his position, he would let the people do whatever they wanted. They asked him to make a god for them. So Aaron agreed. He collected the gold jewelry the people were wearing, melted it down and made a golden calf. The people were happy. They said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." The next day, Aaron built an altar in front of the calf. The people sacrificed burnt offerings on it, then began to party! It was a wild, animal party that lasted all day and all night. Leaders who do not base their decisions on truth or justice can only thoughtlessly follow the majority opinion. They make their people go astray. As history proves, as always, those who know the truth are the absolute minority. This might be the blind spot of democracy.

Third, God was angry. He said to Moses, "Your people have become corrupt. I will destroy them." God was so sorry to see his people that he did not call the Israelites "my" people, but rather, "your" people. God told Moses the facts. Then he said, "These people are a stiff-necked people" (9). Stiff-necked means stubborn and proud. They did not bow their necks to worship God. So God said, "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). But Moses could not be selfish; Moses was a man of integrity. Also, he was a man of God. He had been called to shepherd his people, and to offer his own life to mediate between God and his people.

II. Moses prays for his people's sin (32:11-35)

First, Moses' first prayer was based on the promises of God. There was no way for Moses to approach God. But Moses had a way to approach God through prayer on behalf of his people. Moses sought God's favor, acknowledging that God is the God of promise. Verse 11 says, "But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. 'O Lord,' he said, 'why should

your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" Moses asked God's mercy and gave two reasons: First, the Egyptians would ridicule God for bringing the people out of Egypt only to kill them in the desert. Second, and most important, God had made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God had sworn by himself to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky; he had promised to give them the land. On this basis, Moses begged God to relent and turn from his fierce anger.

How did God respond to Moses' prayer? God heard Moses' prayer and relented. Read verse 14. "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." We must learn to claim God's promises in prayer. God hears prayers that are based on his word. God's promises in the Bible are for whoever believes and claims them. And we claim God's promises with prayer.

Second, Moses rooted out 3,000 rebels. Moses went down the mountain carrying in his hands the precious Ten Commandments engraved by the finger of God on two stone tablets. When he saw with his own eyes the people worshiping the golden calf, and heard the sounds of their singing and revelry, he was furiously angry (19-20). When Moses questioned Aaron, Aaron only made a lame excuse, "They gave me their gold jewelry and I threw it in the fire and out came this calf!" Aaron was not aware of the gravity of his sin because he lived before men and not before God.

It was a very painful thing to punish rebels against God because Moses himself was also a human being. But in order to establish his people as a holy people he had to punish the root of ungodly people. Moses had to act with decisive courage or the whole nation would be destroyed. He stood at the entrance of the camp and called out, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me" (26). The Levites rallied to him. Then he said, "This is what the Lord says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor'" (27). The Levites obeyed. This was radical surgery, but the cancer of rebellion against God and the root of humanism had to be removed; otherwise the whole nation would perish. In the course of doing God's work we also confront the need to deal decisively with rebels against God. It is painful, but we must not compromise. Otherwise, the root of sin grows endlessly. Also, a shepherd must stand on God's side, or he can help no one. He must make hard decisions and do hard things, or people will perish spiritually. About 3,000 people died that day. It was costly and hard, but the Levites obeyed. Because of this event they were ordained to God's service and set apart to the Lord. From this tragedy, a company of men who could stand on God's side and cowork with Moses was born. They became the model for the kingdom of priests that God sought to raise.

Third, Moses asked God to forgive his people's sin. Moses knew that the people had committed a sin so terrible that they all deserved to die. But he did not despair. He told them, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin" (30). He climbed the mountain to intercede for them before God. Moses prayed a heartbroken shepherd's prayer. Read verses 31-32. "So Moses went back to the LORD and said, 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin--but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.'" He did not minimize their sin. He knew that they deserved the death penalty. But with a great shepherd's heart he offered to exchange his own life--even his soul--for theirs. He has the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep (Jn 10:11). Paul also had such a shepherd's heart. He said, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers..." (Ro 9:3).

God heard Moses' prayer and did not wipe the Israelites off the face of the earth. But Moses could not atone for the sins of the people. No man can atone for the sins of another, because all men have sinned. The Lord told Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book." God also punished the people by sending a plague; many died (35). Then he sent Moses down to lead the people to the promised land. Moses didn't give up, so God didn't give up either.

III. Let your Presence go with us (33:1-34:35)

First, God was not happy to be with his people. When Moses came down to the people his heart was full of sorrow. He brought distressing news. Look at 33:1-3. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants." I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.'" God was giving them material blessings, but not spiritual blessings. God would keep his promise. He would give them the land of milk and honey, but he would not go with them.

Look at verse 4. "When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments." Outwardly the Israelites were nothing but clumps of desires. But when they heard that God would not be with them any more, they felt that heaven fell down. They became extremely sorrowful. They lost the joy of life. They lost the direction of life. They felt that they lost their father. Ornaments which they had liked burdened them, so they threw all the ornaments

away. Those who make God sorry seem to be happy. But soon they learn that they lost the joy of life. We should not make God sorry until he does not want to be with us. Instead, we must please God.

Second, the "tent of meeting." God would not go with them. He said, "If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you." Moses knew that God's presence in the midst of his people was the best blessing. He would not accept the milk and honey if God would not go with them. He said, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (15,16) Moses' utmost desire was to be with God himself (33:7-23). Moses decided to pray until he and his people turned God's favor upon them. So Moses made a prayer house by pitching a small tent outside the camp, some distance away. He called it the "tent of meeting." In the future, there would be another Tent of Meeting in the very center of the camp, but now, this could not be. God's wrath would break out against them if he came into the camp, for God is holy. Moses went out to this tent day after day to pray. He sought God with all his heart. God came down to meet Moses in this tent, and his glorious Pillar of Cloud stood at the entrance. The people all came out of their tents and stood at attention, worshiping God, and waiting to see what he would do. In this way they participated in Moses' battle of prayer (8-11). Moses took time to make friends with God. His attention was not focused on the people. He sought God with his whole heart. He said, "If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you" (13a).

Moses had one prayer topic and did not forget it: "Let your Presence go up with us." He reminded God, "This nation is your people." He said, "You have told me to lead this people, but you have not told me whom you will send with me." Finally God relented. Read verse 14. "The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'" Read verse 17. "And the Lord said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.'" A man of prayer changed the destiny of his nation.

Third, God's glory revealed (33:18-34:35). The next day Moses climbed the mountain again. He chiseled out two stone tablets and carried them with him in his hands. Moses had come to love God deeply. He wanted to be close to God, and know him better. Moses had grown from a passionate shepherd of his people to a spiritual man with a deep love relationship with God. He asked God, "Now show me your glory," and the Lord agreed. The Lord told Moses that he would hide him in the cleft of a rock and let Moses see the Lord passing by. But God would not let him see his face--only his back. God said in 34:6,7, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and

faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

When Moses saw the glory of the Lord, he bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. He was overwhelmed by the glory of God. He realized that he too was a sinner, no different from his Israelite brothers. He prayed, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance." (8,9) He included himself in his prayer for forgiveness. God heard his prayer and renewed his covenant with the people of Israel. God promised to do mighty wonders before them that had never been done before in any nation in all the world. [The laws that he repeated in 34:10-26 tell us that God wants a personal relationship with his people. He wants them to love him and to know that he loves them.]

Today we learn how sorry God was when his chosen people did not acknowledge his glorious hope for them. God was sorry when his people remained as slave people instead of growing to be a holy nation. But there was a man named Moses, who loved God and was a shepherd for his people Israel. Because of Moses' intercession and the obedience of the Levites the people repented and God renewed his covenant with them. May God raise each of us as a shepherd like Moses.