

What's the Message? – Lesson 29

This time our study looks at one of the best known stories of the Old Testament . . . Israel and the Golden Calf.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Once again we ask the Lord to bless you through this study, and give you the wisdom to see that although we may not make a golden idol and bow down to it, we still make idols in the sense that we put other things in our lives first . . . instead of God. In this sense we are no different than the Israelites of old, and the lesson they had to learn still applies to us today. Amen.

The setting for our event this week is this: Israel is encamped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and Moses is up on the mountain 40 days and nights to receive the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The story itself begins in the 32nd chapter of the Book of Exodus, where we read:

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 . . . we do not know what has become of him.”

Although we cannot be absolutely certain what the motivation and reasoning of Aaron was . . . and there has been much speculation about this . . . the one thing we do know is that in a moment of weakness, Aaron gave into the wishes of the people and told them to bring to him all the gold rings, earrings, and bracelets they had brought from Egypt, and they did so.

Aaron melted all the gold items and carved a golden calf. The idol he created was likely patterned after the Egyptian god Apis, the sacred bull that they had grown familiar with during their years of slavery.

Then the people said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; . . . then he made a proclamation: “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings . . .

Personally, I don't know how the Israelites could rationalize these two contradictory elements together . . . the idol on the one hand, and a feast to Yahweh on the other. But that's precisely what they did. Then God told Moses to go back down from the mountain because the people had corrupted themselves and turned aside from faithful obedience.

Moses did as instructed, bringing with him the two tablets of stone on which God had written the Ten Commandments. And we read in verse 19, 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. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people of Israel drink it.

At this point, as you might expect, Moses lit into Aaron, and demanded him to explain what he had done. Didn't Aaron realize the sin that he had participated in, and the reaction of God? Aaron, of course, started making excuses, and came up with this ringer: "I threw the gold into this fire, and out came this calf!" 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 themselves together to him."

Now, Teacher, there are more details we could go into if we had the time, but those are the main elements in this story that happened so very long ago. It is a situation so foreign to us, and so different from our day and age. Could there possibly be a message here pertinent to us? If so, what is that message?

Absolutely there is a message for us. And it is very pertinent. But let's step back and first take a look at the big picture. What is happening here? The leader of this group is away for a long time . . . forty days and forty nights is the phrase . . . and the people come to the number two man and say basically: "We don't know what's happened to Moses, and besides, we can't see this invisible God he has been talking about. Give us something visible, something we can see and understand."

So Aaron does precisely that, and gives the people what they want. But what are the consequences of this action? In chapter 20 we read the Ten Commandments, and one of the first of those was "You shall have no other gods before me." In chapter 19 we saw that God said to them: "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples." There is no doubt that God had made it very clear that He demanded obedience from Israel. But they had willfully and shamefully disobeyed.

We can argue that our situation is much different. You just don't see anyone bowing down to idols in our society. But do we create gods of a different type? What is it that we put first in our lives? Money? Power? Fame? Possessions? If any of these things, or anything else, takes first place in our priorities, it has become our god, our idol. Are we fully aware of the consequences? Do we willfully turn away from God?

Do we recall that The Lord has declared Himself to be the God of judgment and justice, and that He will visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him? We are not so different from these Israelites after all, and we will face the same judgment they did, unless we truly repent and ask for His forgiveness. If God is not first in your life, then He has been replaced by something else, and that something is really your god of choice.

Next time we will review and summarize the lessons of the Book of Exodus.

This series has been developed and written by our director of teacher training, Mr. D. A. Senter, and is copyrighted by Lamb of God Lutheran Church in Flower Mound, Texas. Your narrator is Dale Gaus.

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