

Moses and the Golden Calf

Revival

By Tom Hill

Bible Text: Exodus 33:1-17

Preached on: Sunday, July 27, 2012

Master Ministries International, Inc.

3581 Knollview Ct SE, #305

Grand Rapids, MI 49546-5923

Website: www.masterministries.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/masterministries

One of the darkest moments in the history of Israel came when they desired Aaron to make for them a golden calf. A little background before we get to the golden calf.

We have examined Jacob and Joseph and Judah and how they had to go to Egypt to find food because of a severe famine that occurred and the whole family of Jacob moved down to Egypt to live there because Joseph had gathered food from all of the nation of Egypt into storehouses and they had plenty of food. They didn't expect to stay there 400 years which they did.

The family line of Jacob lived in Egypt for 400 years. During that time they multiplied into millions of people. The Scriptures tell us that a pharaoh rose up in Egypt who did not know Joseph and he placed the children of Jacob into servitude. They became slaves, menial slaves gathering straw to make bricks. And many of the great buildings and structures that you see in Egypt in our day even now that have lasted over the centuries, the children of Israel helped to build those.

Well, God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob a Promised Land, a land where he would take them and it would become for them a fruitful, abundant land, their own possession. And he had told Abraham that his family would go down into Egypt. They would be there for four generations, but he would bring them out. And the day arrived for God to bring out the children of Israel in the land of Egypt. And God used Moses to bring about a series of plagues throughout all of Egypt that ultimately ended with the death of the first born in every family in Egypt as well as the firstborn of all other creatures. That provided the last straw.

The Egyptian people said, "Go. Leave. We don't want you here any longer. Leave."

So Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt towards the Promised Land. On their way to the Promised Land they came to Mount Sinai. And we find that recorded for us starting in Exodus chapter 20. And for the next several chapters—Exodus chapter 20 through chapter 31—God meets with Moses and Joshua on top of Mount Sinai and gives to them the law, the life guide that God provided for his children, how he wanted them to live.

We normally call it the 10 Commandments. And God provided it to Moses to give to the children of Israel and he provided for them a whole series of ways in which he wanted them to worship him. He told them at the very beginning of Exodus chapter 20, the very start of this session with them, he said, “I am the God who brought you out of Egypt. There is no other God. Therefore, you will have no other gods beside me.” A direct contradiction to the pluralism that they would find when they got into the Promised Land, because, as I have mentioned to you on numerous occasions, the people of that day had thousands of gods that they worshipped. And God who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt said, “I am God and God alone. There are no other gods beside me. Don’t try and raise up some other god and say he is equal with me. Don’t try to raise up other gods and say, ‘I am going to worship those there and I am going to worship that god there,’ No. I alone am God. Worship me and me alone. Furthermore, do not make any image of me. Don’t make any idol that you would fall down and worship.”

And God gave very explicit directions of how they should worship him and him alone. If you want to read that, you can find it at Exodus chapter 20 through verse 31.

Well, the time that Moses and Joshua spent on the top of Mount Sinai lasted 40 days, a significant time period. This wasn’t just a weekend. This was an extended time period, 40 days. The children of Israel, meanwhile grew restless.

“Where is this guy Moses? This guy Moses who brought us out, who came and said, ‘I am going to take you to the promised Land,’ he has disappeared. And here we are down here in the wilderness, no food, no water. What are we going to do?”

Unbelief began to develop in the children of Israel and what they just a few days previous had promised to worship God and God alone suddenly they decided to ditch it all.

“This guy Moses is gone. We don’t know what has happened to him. We don’t know what we are going to do.”

And they came to Aaron, Moses’ brother, who Moses has put in charge while he went up to the mountain. They came to Aaron and said, “Make us gods. Make us gods like we used to have back in Egypt. Make us those kinds of gods that we can worship. And, by the way, we want to follow those gods back to Egypt. We have had enough of this journey already, thank you. Let’s go back to Egypt.”

And, of course, they had a faulty memory of what times were like back in Egypt. They forgot that they were slaves. They were forgot the cruelty with which the Egyptians treated them. Infidelity sprang up in less than 40 days.

Aaron said, “I’ll tell you what you do. You bring me your gold and you bring me your golden earrings and I will make you an idol.”

They brought him their gold, brought him their earrings. He cast it in the fire and melted it down and he created a golden calf and set it before them and said, “Here, oh Israel, are your gods who brought you out of Egypt.”

This is the man whom God used to be the spokesperson on behalf of Moses. Moses said, “All right. I will go back to Egypt to lead these people out to the Promised Land. But you know me, God. I am not very good speaking in public. So I need someone to help me.”

And God said, “All right. I will raise up your brother Aaron. He will be your spokesperson.”

This brother of Moses had seen all of the plagues in Egypt and all of the supernatural, miraculous things that God had done and he was the one who said, “All right. I will make you and idol.”

And they bowed down and they worshipped the idol. And Aaron said to them, “I want you to come out and worship and tomorrow we are going to have a great feast day and we are going to worship the Lord.”

You know, you can’t just take the name of the Lord and put it as a name tag on something and have it be the Lord. That is what he did. He took the name of God who had told them, “Worship me and me alone. Do not make any images. Do not attach my name to any images to fall down and worship him.” And he completely rejected all of that and said, “Here is the Lord, the one who brought you out of Egypt.”

Meanwhile Moses and Joshua enjoyed the presence of God on Mount Sinai and God said to Moses, “Moses, there is trouble down below. There is trouble down below. You need to go back because the people whom you have brought out of Egypt have fashioned them a gold calf and they are worshipping it.”

Moses and Joshua scurried down the mountain and to their dismay they could hear the racket before they even got anywhere near the crowd. As so often happens, when you go from infidelity to idolatry you end up with iniquity. And they came upon this mass of people that were naked, indulging in all kinds of debauchery and immorality and wickedness, who less than 40 days earlier had promised to worship God and God alone.

“All that you say we will do.”

Promises, promises, promises. And here they had, because of their unbelief in God, they had rejected the God who had demonstrated himself to them with supernatural, miraculous things and they rejected that God. They doubted his word. He said, “I will take you the Promised Land” and they didn’t believe him. And they turned to that which they could see with their own eyes and they could touch with their own hands and fashion the God that they worshipped instead of the true and living God. And it very quickly turned to debauchery and iniquity.

Moses came upon the scene and he came to his brother Aaron whom he had placed in charge and he said, "Aaron, what did you do? How could you do this?"

"Well, the people came. The people came to me and they said they wanted idols. And you know how these people are. They are kind of stiff necked. They are kind of troublesome people and I was afraid and so I yielded to them."

Some leader, huh? Some leader. That is not leadership. That is cowardice.

Moses took the golden calf, pounded it into dust, strewed it on their water supply and said, "Drink it. You wanted gold, you can have your gold. Drink it." And then after that he said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Who of all of the mass of people here, who is on the Lord's side? Come and join me right here beside me."

It says the sons of Levi came. We don't know how many there were. But the sons of Levi came and joined him. And he said, "All right, gentlemen, what I want you to do is I want you to take your swords and I want you to go throughout the camp and I want everyone of you to kill your brother and your neighbor as a judgment for this gross sin that they had committed against God."

And they went throughout the camp and they slew 3000 people for their sin.

Moses said, "You know, you have sinned a grievous sin against God. I am going to go back to God and I am going to intercede on your behalf. Perhaps God will have mercy upon you."

And so he left and he went back up onto the mountain, uninvited, by the way. Went back up on the mountain to plead with God for mercy on behalf of the people whom God had brought out of Egypt. And he felt so strongly on behalf of his brothers and sisters that he came to God with this offer. He said, "Please, God, forgive these people for their sin. But if you won't forgive them, then take me instead. Take my life for theirs."

He offered himself up as a substitute to pay the penalty that this mob of people deserved to suffer.

God said, "No, I am not going to take you as a substitute. When I come down among them, I will punish them. I will take care of that on my own. But, you know, I said I was going to lead you out. I will lead you out, but I am not going to go with you. I will send an angel. I will not have my presence among sin. I will send an angel and the angel will take you into the Promised Land." That is chapter 32 of Exodus.

Then we come to Exodus 33 that I have printed out for you. This is the chapter that provides for us God's way of restoration. What would he do? How did God respond to all of this, their gross sinfulness? How would God restore them back we find recorded. Follow along as I read it and then we will make a few comments on it and we will close.

The LORD said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ 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. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say 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.’ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”

And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?”

And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”¹

A couple of things I want to highlight from these verses. God said, “I am not going to go with you. I am going to send an angel. Strip off your ornaments.”

Now what did that mean? The children of Israel, as you will recall, when they came out of Egypt the Egyptians wanted them to leave so desperately, they gave them all of their jewels, all of their gold, their silver, their jewels, everything that was of value. They said, “Here. Take it. Get out of here. Leave.” And they wore those ornaments on their clothing, including their earrings and various kinds of jewelry they wore on them. It was from these gifts from the children of Egypt that the Israelites took to give to Aaron to make the golden calf.

God said, “Get rid of the ornaments. It has become a plague to you. It has become an obstacle to you in worshipping me. You have more value, place more value upon those things than you place value upon trusting and believing me. Get rid of those things.”

What was it that Jesus, that God was trying to bring about in their lives? Repentance. Repentance.

“Turn from that thing which has caused you to sin, that has diverted your attention and your life away from me. Get rid of it. Set it aside. Turn to me alone.”

And then we see Moses once again interceding on behalf of the children of Israel. This time he did not go back up on the mountain, but he went to a tent that he had set up outside of the camp where people who sought the Lord could go and they would meet God there. That pillar that came down, that is what God promised them. That was his presence. He told them when they left Egypt, “I will give you a pillar of fire by night and a cloudy pillar by day that will guide you and direct you. That is my presence.”

And God’s presence came to that tent where Moses was. And the people saw God’s presence there with Moses. And Moses once again pleaded on behalf of the children of Israel. And he says to God, “God, you brought these people out. They are your people. They are not my people. Quit calling them my people. They are your people. You brought them out. They are your people. And you haven’t told me yet how you are going to pull this off. Who is going to go with us? Who is going to protect us? Who is going to make it possible for us to overcome our enemies? Who is going to deliver us into this Promised Land that you have told us about? You haven’t told me how this is going to happen. I want to know. You said I have found grace in your sight. You said I have found favor in your sight. You said you know me by name. All right. I am coming to you and I am asking you to tell me. How are you going to do this?”

God saw the great humility of Moses and his deep care for the people whom he led and he said, “I am going to go with you. I will go with you. I will take you there. I will defeat

¹ Exodus 33:1-17.

your enemies.”

And Moses, just to make sure said, “Now, God, I want to make sure I have got this clear. You said you are going to go. If you are not going to go, I am not moving. I am going to stay right here. I won’t go anywhere without you.”

And God reassured him, “No, I am going to go with you. The thing that you have asked, I am going to give you. I will lead you to the Promised Land.”

As we look back over a brief recounting of this era in the life of the children of Israel we get a very clear picture of these people, unbelieving, guilty of infidelity to the God whom they swore they would serve, failing to trust him, the very shortest of time span, making for themselves an idol. But they said, “This is God. This is the God who brought us out of Egypt,” calling him God and calling him Lord in direct contradiction of what they had promised only a few weeks previously. And then we see the great immorality and iniquity into which they fell as a consequence of their sin. And we see the intercession of Moses on behalf of them, two different times, pleading with God to intervene and to give grace and mercy and protect his people and provide for them.

We do see their repentance. They did repent. They stripped off the ornaments. They realized their great sinfulness that they had committed. They never put them back on again.

Then we see the character of God displayed, a God of omnipresence, he knew up on Mount Sinai what transpired down below. Moses and Aaron didn’t, but he did. We see his mercy. He could have struck them dead in an instant.

“You promised me. I warned you what I would do to you if you failed to obey my law. And you have violated my law already. We haven’t even moved location yet and you have already violated my law.”

God could have struck them all dead right on the spot and been entirely just in doing so. But God was merciful. He did not give to them what they deserved and in grace he made provision again for him to restore his presence back with them. God of grace, God of mercy.

How does this correlate to you and me? The picture that we see described for us gives us two pictures. One picture it gives to us is the condition of sinful man without God. And not only does that picture describe our world, but in too many instances, that also describes people who call themselves Christians. At heart really doubtful, really not fully trusting God, holding on to something they can touch and see, trusting that instead of trusting God. And that idolatry will lead us like it did them, into sin.

We also see a picture of Jesus and it ties together these events with Jesus, because Moses gives us a picture of Jesus. Now in many ways we could go over the life of Moses and see a variety of ways in which he pictures Jesus. I will just pick two of them from these

events. He interceded on behalf of sinners. That is what Jesus does. And that is what he did centuries ago when he came and lived and died and rose again. He interceded on behalf of sinners like you and like me. And then we see Moses offering himself as a substitute.

“Take me instead of them.”

Jesus became a substitute on behalf of people like you and like me. And he bore the punishment that people like you and I deserve. And he endured it that those of us who come to him in faith and trust, reliance upon him solely, exclusively might find eternal life and in him alone and no one else.

It also gives to us a picture of God’s ways. God is a God of grace and a God of mercy. And he has made a means and provision for people who deserve judgment and punishment, a means by which he can restore and reconcile them back to him that they might, once again, enjoy his presence in their lives.

We see it described for us very clearly in what he required of the children of Israel, repentance and trust upon him. And God requires the same of us today, to come to the Father through Jesus by repentance, by turning from everything that we trust, that we can see and can touch and on which we depend and rely, turning from all of that, trusting in Christ alone.

What can the Spirit of God do in our lives today with these truths? He can correct us from error and point out the truth. Salvation is available, but through Christ only, through faith and trust in him. We can rejoice in the knowledge that we have on the one hand. It isn’t hopeless. There is hope in Christ. And some of us, maybe all of us. I don’t know all of you that well. But those of us who have come to faith in Christ, we know the contentment and the reality of that truth.

How are we going to respond? On the one hand we can just cast it all aside and say it is foolishness. I am going to keep doing what I have always been doing. It has worked good for me over these 50, 60, 70, 80 years. I am just going to keep doing everything the way I have been. You can say, “I am just going to cool it. I am just going to think about this for a while. Boy, that is an awful lot to swallow. I am just going to cool it for a while and just kind of think, ponder, meditate about it.”

Or you can come to Christ and trust him. What changes do you need to make? Do you need to confess, as the children of Israel did, your failure to trust God and him alone and his provision for you in Jesus Christ, the only Savior of sinners? And in confessing your sin before him and coming to him in faith and trust, casting yourself upon him, finding him sufficient.

I pray that we learn from the bad example of the children of Israel during a dark night in their history. Come to Christ. Trust him. Find him sufficient for everything that you face in life.

Let's close in prayer.