

Sermon File # 680

Scripture Text and Reading (selected portions of text): Exodus 32

Sermon Title: *The Golden Calf: When God's People Sin*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 9 October 2011

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact

Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

All Rights Reserved.

The Golden Calf: When God's People Sin

Introduction:

I invite you to join me in opening our Bibles to our text for today, once again from Exodus, the book of God's deliverance of his people. Last Sunday we concluded our study of the Ten Commandments, and today we take a quantum leap all the way to the 32nd Chapter. Following the giving of the Decalogue, the people trembled with fear when they saw and heard a manifestation of God's power in thunder, lightning, a trumpet sound, and smoke covering Mt Sinai. Moses calmed their fears and then continued to receive additional instruction from the Lord to give to the people, which basically were expansions and applications of the Ten Commandments (20:18-23:33). The Lord then confirmed his covenant with the people, who responded with a solemn declaration of obedience (24:1-3). Following additional instructions for the tabernacle construction, furnishing, worship and the priesthood, the Lord gave to Moses two stone tablets, containing the Decalogue "inscribed by the finger of God" (31:18).

Now we come to our text for today, regarding what took place at the foot of the mountain while Moses was on the mountain receiving God's instructions. This well-known narrative of the golden calf brings us to what has been called the "climax of the book in the coming of God to live among his people...the reason why the Lord led the Israelites out of Egypt" (Oswalt, *CBC*, 516f) which is recorded in the 32nd and the 33rd Chapters of Exodus.

Follow as I read portions of our text from **Exodus 32**.

Here are some interesting notations about the golden calf:

"Not until 1990 did archaeologists unearth the first golden calf in Palestine, and, to their surprise, it stood only a few inches tall. Contrary to popular depictions in films and historical books, Aaron's solid gold calf too may have been very small, but elevated on a pedestal for visual emphasis. Undoubtedly the Israelites knew the bull-god Apis, one of Egypt's important gods" (Stafford, 78).

Even though the golden calf may have been small, its construction and use were a "big deal" in the eyes of God. Moses had been gone from them during his audience with the Lord God for nearly six weeks, and the people became restless and perhaps even panicky, and were motivated to ask Moses' brother Aaron to construct an idol, in direct violation of the Second Commandment against idol construction and worship (20:4; 32:1).

This account of the worship of the golden calf is not about what happens when pagans sin, but rather what happened when God's people fall into sin (Enns, 593). It doesn't depict God's anger with unbelieving pagans when they engage in idol worship and immorality, but rather it shows the sinful and rebellious actions of God's people, who were delivered through the Sea and given the covenant and the Ten Commandments, and who had recently reaffirmed their commitment to obey and follow the Lord God (24:3).

The event of the golden calf was critical because it "could threaten to unravel God's entire plan," undoing what God had been doing to deliver and form a covenant relationship with his people since his calling them out of Egypt (Enns, 568f). In fact, had not God intervened in judgment, his promises to Abraham would have been in jeopardy (Genesis 12:2; 15:4f, etc.).

This passage is a critically important one for us today as God's people. We too continue to engage in spiritual warfare and moral temptation because, as long as we're on our present earthly pilgrimage, we must resist the downward pull of the old sinful, fallen nature that Paul describes in Romans 7. The apostle also wrote to the Corinthians, giving them warnings from Israel's history, and specifically from this event at Mt Sinai. Paul refers to this event of idol worship resulting in sexual immorality, resulting in God's judgment. He then says that "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the

fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:11-13).

We need to carefully listen to what the Lord God is saying to us about the dangers of idolatry that leads to other sins. It's interesting that, to conclude his letter to the church on the theme of assurance of our salvation through our love for one another, John's last word is one of warning: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

The message of the golden calf shows us by way of warning, first of all...

The acts of our sinful nature

Amazingly, so soon after their miraculous deliverance and God's dramatic revelation, their awe-inspired worship and vow of obedience, the people of God engaged in egregious rebellion. They stooped to the level of the false religion and immoral practices of the Egyptians. Once again they demonstrated that it was easier to get the Israelites out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the Israelites (Ryken, 972). As we think about the acts of the sinful nature, let's consider...

Where and how they begin

In writing to the Galatians, Paul reminds us that we have a choice—to live by the Spirit a life that pleases God or to fall back into living according to the dictates of the sinful nature, what he calls "the acts of the sinful nature," which he says are obvious: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery ("lustful pleasures," *NLT*); idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before," Paul continues, "that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21). In this sordid behavior list, Paul says in effect that when believers act in these ways, they're acting like pure pagans, who have never received eternal life and a new nature.

Perhaps there were people in the Galatian churches who had made their faith confession and were baptized but had slipped back into their pagan lifestyle; and that falling away from grace (Hebrews 6:6) was not all at once a radical departure from a Christian lifestyle, but perhaps, like with the Israelites, began with doubts and questions about their original experience with the living God. "Where is this fellow Moses? We don't know what's happened to him."

When God seems to grow silent while we live in a spiritual desert, questions and doubts will arise. Unless we turn to the Lord and remain steadfast in waiting upon

and trusting in him, in the bad times (which he promised: John 15:18-16:4, etc.) as well as the good times, our questions and doubts can settle into unbelief and a rejection of the truth. The impatience of the Israelites waiting for Moses for nearly six weeks gave way to doubt, which became unbelief. They became disappointed with God, who wasn't living up to their expectations and meeting their time table.

Also contributing to their eventually sinful behavior was their suffering from "spiritual amnesia" (Ryken, 981f):

"They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea" (Psalm 106:21f).

Forgetting what God has done for us in Christ, in his death and resurrection and in his gracious rescue of our lives from sin, death and hell is a fatal error. Once we forget the saving grace of God and our commitment to follow Jesus as Lord, we lose the focus of our lives. As we noted last Sunday in the 10th Commandment against coveting, when we fail to focus on our worship of and love for the living God, we begin to desire and to covet lesser things, and soon fall into the worship of idols.

Mankind is incurably religious, and we will worship something or someone if not the living God of our Lord Jesus. The Israelites too, in their incurable religiosity gone bad, called on Aaron to make them other gods (1) which they could see and touch, which were "boiled down" to a golden calf (2-4). When the faith of the Israelites turned to doubt, idolatry was quick to follow. "It is but a step or two from murmuring to idolatry" (Ramm, 182).

When the living God of our Lord Jesus is abandoned, then substitute gods are made, gods that give us comfort and allow us to pursue our selfish interests and pleasures. It's possible even to remain an active church-goer and participant and begin to worship other gods. We substitute the God of holiness who demands our holy conduct and a life that pleases and glorifies him, with a god whom we can manipulate and ask to bless our selfish pursuits and who stays out of our way when we get on in "the real world."

The idol we make can be very religious, Protestant, evangelical and even very Baptist! We can construct a false god we sing and pray to on Sundays, one who is not the living, demanding, and terrifyingly holy God of the Scriptures. This will be the god of our own making, who suits our expectations and is eager to bless our every endeavor. When we listen to his preachers, we are entertained and comforted in our assurance that all he wants to do is make us wealthy and healthy and he will otherwise leave us alone. We can worship this god of our making on Sunday and leave feeling better about ourselves, having just sung with gusto, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!" and then go out into the world and live like the devil, in a lifestyle Paul describes in the passage above.

Paul also tells us...

Where they lead

The Apostle Paul in essence says these acts of the sinful nature, when unchecked, lead to hell (Galatians 5:21). The Israelites who fell into this idolatry began to live like the devil himself. They craved a gods like the ones in Egypt, and the worship of those false gods also led to the same kind of immorality among the Egyptians.

In another passage that sounds a lot like the one from Galatians, Paul warns about the danger of false assurance that could lead some of the Corinthian believers to experience the same kind of judgment as experienced by the Israelite in the golden calf episode:

“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of heaven? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you *were*,” adds Paul (emphasis mine). “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Those who claim to be God’s children and whose lifestyle shows those sinful characteristics are only kidding themselves and maybe a few others. God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7), and his judgment is certain. We need to heed the warnings from Scripture about the serious business of being a follower of Christ and one who professes faith in him. Doubts, murmuring, and moral compromise can lead to spiritual shipwreck. You may continue to sing “Blessed Assurance,” and find false comfort and assurance on a past profession of faith or a fading baptism certificate. But Paul gives the frightening picture of what happens when God’s revelations of truth is disregarded and we begin to make idols in place of the living God of our Lord Jesus (Romans 1:18ff).

As the rebellious Israelites discovered, the events of the golden calf show us also...

The anger of a holy God

God’s response of anger and wrath to the sinful rebellion of his people is difficult for us to comprehend. Our difficulty is due in part, *at least*, to the fact that we have minimized the serious nature of sin and disobedience and have maximized the “leniency” of God toward sin. We fail to see the extent of his holiness and his demand that his people be holy (Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:16). We can dismiss this scene of God’s judgment as “the way God was in the Old Testament,” but God has not changed. The God of the First Covenant is the God of the New, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to see...

His justified judgment

“It was a fearful and bloody day, never to be forgotten in the history of Israel. We, with our modern laissez-faire approach to religion and morality, find the incidents barbarous, unacceptable. We feel sickened by the atrocity of sword-carrying Levites slashing their way through cowering ranks of guilty Israelites and killing three thousand of them in an orgy of retribution.” But as John White continues,

“Our values have changed. To Moses the bloodshed was not to be compared with the horror of the people’s sin. Having been delivered from Egypt by a God who changed the course of nature, who opened up the Red Sea, who led them himself by a pillar of cloud and fire, a God who revealed himself as the only God, the eternal God, the true God—the shallow Israelites had in a few petulant days dismissed him from their minds and had fallen back into idolatry. Their fickleness and their blasphemy appalled Moses; his horror was even greater because he had arrived among them after being in the immediate presence of the same God whose name they had lightly defiled” (White, 39f).

Not only is God just in judging sin, but his perfect justice requires his wrath and punishment. It was to professing Christians that the writer of Hebrews warned about habitual and continual sin and rejecting the grace of God through Christ’s sacrifice:

“If we keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:26-31).

God hates sin because it violates his holiness and robs him of the glory of holiness he has given to his people. He hates sin because of what it does to us, bringing suffering, damage to the image of God and to our relationship with him and with others. God hates sin because of what it did to his Son, who suffered for us the consequences of and the just punishment for our sins. God hates sin because it separates us from his loving presence.

The Lord God saw the sin of the people and told Moses about his coming judgment that would be meted out on them. God said that he would make a completely new start in kingdom, nation building by wiping the Israelites off the face of the earth and starting all over again (10). I’ve often wondered why God didn’t do this in the first place, just as he did with Noah.

RC Sproul says we confuse God's justice and mercy, and thus we shrink in horror when we read about his anger and wrath:

"When God's justice falls, we are offended because we think God owes us perpetual mercy. We must not take his grace for granted. We must never lose our capacity to be amazed by grace." Sproul notes that instead of singing the popular "Amazing Grace," we would prefer to sing the song, "Amazing Justice." In referring to Jesus' recounting the falling of the tower in Siloam as a warning for all us sinners to repent (Luke 13:4f), Sproul continues: "Our lyrics tend to go like this:

*Amazing Justice, cruel and sharp
That wounds a saint like me:
I'm so darn good it makes no sense—
The tower fell on me"* (Sproul, 167).

We all deserve God's wrath and by his standard of perfect justice, we all stand hopelessly condemned. But notice, that the God of holy anger and judgment allowed Moses the opportunity of...

His involvement with intercession

When God declared his intent to destroy the entire lot of the apostate Israelites, Moses immediately began to intercede for the people, that the Lord might spare them (11). And, amazingly, the Lord God "relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened" (14).

A lot of ink has been spilled over the idea of God's sovereign purposes and whether or not he actually changes his mind or if this is "another anthropomorphism" (more properly 'anthropopathism'), by which God's activity is explained, by analogy, in strictly human terms (Cole, 217). Some reason that God anticipates Moses' prayer in the first place, and thus his "relenting" is actually fulfilling what he had always planned to do. I leave this as a mystery of God's ways, which are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8f), but agree that we should understand it as the text reads. "Moses gets God to change his mind. There is really no other way to read this, and we should not try to avoid it" (Enns, 572). The focus of this passage is not on predestination and sovereignty versus human free will and "the openness of God." Rather, the focus of this passage is on Moses as an intercessor and "not on the inner workings of God's psyche" (Enns, 573).

I see this as the awesome responsibility God has given to us to join in his eternal purposes through intercession. Yes, I do believe God's ultimate purposes for his people were fulfilled, but that he involved Moses in the ministry of intercession, just as he involves his people today. God has chosen to work his will through the prayers of his people, who are to wrestle with him, to agonize for the conversion of the lost (Romans 9:1f; 10:1) and to pray earnestly for the repentance of sinners, including those numbered among God's children (James 5:17-20).

We're to pray for a brother or sister we see committing sin, and pray for God to give that errant one life (1 John 5:16). John mentioned also the possibility of a sin that leads to death, which is like the sin of "ultimate apostasy." John indicates that it is useless to intercede for those who have left the apostolic faith and joined a heretical, anti-Christian movement such as those he denounced in his letters (Comfort, 2,146f). What Jesus seems to describe is the hardened, irrevocable condition of an "unpardonable sinner," who has lost forever the capacity or will to respond to grace (Matthew 12:31f). This condition seems to be reflected also in the Book of Hebrews, describing those who have tasted the work of the Spirit but then fall away irremediably and lose the capacity for repentance, bringing disgrace to the crucified Son of God (6:4-6).

In his intercession, God involved Moses in his work of judgment and death on those irremediably hardened and his work of sparing those capable of repentance. This is why some were spared and others were destroyed. Moses' shattering the stone tablets seemed a ritual act that symbolized the breaking of God's covenant with those who were unpardonable (Durham, 430).

We who have come to faith in Christ are the objects of God's saving grace, and a grace that came to us through the Word of God (Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 1:23) and the power of the Spirit (John 16:8-11; 2 Corinthians 4:6). God also worked through compassionate witnesses and faithful, fervent intercessors who pled with God for our salvation. Likely also, we have had those who prayed for our spiritual protection (Ephesians 6:18ff) and who interceded for our restoration when we wandered from the truth (James 5:19f).

Moses' intercession was a vital element in God's sparing those Israelites who had hearts to repent and return to covenant faithfulness. The incident of the golden calf also shows us...

The atonement through our Mediator

Moses made an offer that shows us something of the Spirit of Christ himself, which also was evident in the Apostle Paul (Romans 9:3). Although Moses was not offering to be eternally condemned, he was nevertheless willing to pay the "ultimate price" in order for the people to be spared judgment for their sin (Enns, 577). But his offer was rejected because he was unqualified. The only way their sin could be atoned and paid for would be through...

The only perfect sacrifice

We need to understand that the God we see here in Exodus and the Old Covenant is not different from the God of our Lord Jesus Christ in the New Covenant. God revealed in his Son Jesus hates sin just as much as in the Old Covenant. He's just as holy and just today as in his response to the sins of his people at Mt Sinai with the

golden calf. God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). But now God acts differently because a perfect sacrifice, a perfect Mediator has made atonement for our sin and has satisfied the wrath of God and his demands for justice. Now through the suffering and death of the sinless Son of God, the “final, complete, once-for-all atonement for sin has happened.” Because of what Christ has done, God, the just one, can act differently toward us. The good news of the story of Christ Jesus is that Exodus 32 does not apply to us today (Enns, 593f). It isn't that God has changed, but rather that a Mediator has come. One who knew no sin became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The episode of the golden calf, though tragic for God's people who fell into unrepentant sin, has become good news for us because of the vital difference the cross of Christ and the empty tomb have made for us (1 Peter 3:18). We have, just like the people of the Old Covenant, failed to live up to the righteous requirements of the law and have failed to live a life that pleases God and that receives the full measure of his blessing. Only Christ has met the demands of the law and became the perfect sacrifice for our sins. By grace through faith his merits are transferred to our account (Galatians 3:13). God pronounces us “not guilty” through the righteousness of Christ and then begins the process of making us righteous as Christ is righteous, through the work of the Holy Spirit, who forms Christ's character in us (Romans 8:1ff).

The experience of the golden calf was the measure God needed to take to preserve Israel and fulfill his calling to them to be his chosen people, his holy nation (19:6). The Lord God continues to call his people today and through the atoning sacrifice he calls us to follow him and shows us...

The only way to live

Because God is perfectly holy and loving, he has made the provision for our forgiveness of sin and also of our life in fellowship and peace with him. As Paul says to so-called Christians given to legalism, “by observing the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16). Also, the Book of Hebrews was written to warn new converts from Judaism against returning to their way of legalism and gaining favor with God through their righteousness. Should they turn away from grace through faith in Christ they would be guilty of crucifying Christ all over again and there would be no hope for them (Hebrews 6:6). Earlier in the letter, the writing pastor warns them against God's judgment for neglecting such a great salvation (2:3).

The only way to live is by faith, trust and obedience to and love for the Lord God, who has done so much for us. He has called us into a life of blessing, and his love for us is so intense he will take whatever measures are necessary to draw us back into his love into lives that honor him, reflect his glory and enjoy his love.

The golden calf shows us definitely how *not* to live. Disobedience and idolatry, living for someone or something other than God leads to sinful, self-destructive and Christ-

dishonoring behavior. For a child of God, living in rebellion is a dangerous life. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). God loves us so much, he will take sometimes drastic and painful measures to bring us back into his love and fellowship. A life outside of God's will that brings dishonor to his name is mortally dangerous, as we read from Paul (1 Corinthians 5:4f) and John (1 John 5:16). Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:11 that God's judgment on the rebellious Israelites is a serious example and warning to rebellious believers (Wiersbe, 197). Those who are outside God's will are in danger of having their works for Christ destroyed and being "narrowly saved" on the Day of Judgment (1 Corinthians 3:12-15) and being ashamed before Christ when he appears (1 John 2:28).

It may be that professing believers will be finally and narrowly saved in the end by the mercy and grace of God. But there is no basis for assurance for those living outside of God's will, since we're told to make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10) and to always live in a spirit of self-examination (2 Corinthians 13:5). God works through the intercession of his people to rescue the wandering but those who wander have no assurance they will be restored to grace (James 5:19).

Conclusion:

The only way to live is to keep in fellowship with Christ, to so love and trust him we'll keep ourselves from idols. If you've wandered from the truth, you're here today because someone has been praying for you, interceding just as Moses prayed for those in danger of God's judgment.

God hates sin but he loves you and yearns for you to return to him. Another great picture we have of the heart of God is that of the father of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32). This is the way God acts toward us today. Although the rebellious son went his own way toward self-destruction the father always yearned for him to return home. God yearns to forgive, restore and bless you with his love, eternal life, joy and fellowship. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus, he is faithful and just to forgive you today of all your sin, which was atoned, paid for through his death on the cross for you (1 John 1:9).

God loves you so much he will take severe measures to bring you back into his love. He disciplines those he loves, just as a loving parent must discipline an errant child. If you don't respond to his discipline, he may remove your negative influence and discredit to his glory by your hastened mortal death, as was true of the rebellious member of the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:4f).

We need to take inventory of our walk with Christ in the light of the golden calf, and as John admonished, be sure we are keeping our lives free from idols (1 John 5:21), that nothing and no one is more important in our lives than Christ and that he is Lord

over everything we are and all that we have. We must let God be God and Jesus be Lord.

We also, in our personal walk with Christ, must be mindful of our fellow believers who have wandered from the truth and erred in their conduct as God's children (James 5:19). We must "stand in the gap" as Moses did for Israel, interceding with God for the erring and seeking gently to restore them (Galatians 6:1).

I pray that we will respond to God's gracious warning about what happens when his people sin and that we will seek his mercy for ourselves and for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What do you think are the reasons the Israelites disobeyed the 2nd Commandment and asked Aaron to make an idol of other gods?
2. Why do you think John gave a warning to Christians to keep from idols (1 John 5:21)?
3. What are some idols that are worshiped ("anything that might take God's place," *NLT*), even by professing Christians, today?
4. Reflect on how idols could be constructed and worshiped in your life.
5. If God's reaction of anger seems excessive to us, what might this say about our view of God, his holiness and the serious nature of sin?
6. What has God done to provide for the removal of our guilt and his justified punishment of our sins?
7. What part does intercession (prayer for others) have in God's work of saving the lost and restoring wayward believers?
8. Spend some time in prayerful reflection about your relationship with Christ, confessing any known sin and asking and receiving his faithful forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9).

Sources cited in this manuscript:

R Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*

Philip W Comfort, *NLT Study Bible, New Living Translation, Second Edition*, notes on 1 John

John I Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 3: Exodus*

Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*

John N Oswalt, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Genesis and Exodus*, General Editor, Philip W Comfort

Bernard L Ramm, *His Way Out: a Fresh Look at Exodus*

Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory (Preaching the Word Series)*, General Editor, R Kent Hughes

RC Sproul, *The Holiness of God*

Tim Stafford, *The Student Bible with Concordance, New International Version*, General Editor, Philip Yancey

John White, *Daring to Draw Near: People in Prayer*

Warren W Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus*

All Rights Reserved.