

UNIT 61

THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF

(Exodus 32:1–33:6)

This lengthy unit is an unhappy interlude in the flow of the argument of the book, albeit a designed interlude to make a point. Between the giving of the Law and the Tabernacle instructions we have the idolatry of the people. This is a blatant violation of the covenant, a great act of defiant disloyalty. But through it all Moses shines as the great intercessor for the people. The subject of the chapter is the sin of idolatry and the effects of that sin and the remedy.

The account of course reports what happened. But it also serves another point. It is a painful way for the Israelites, and those who read the book later, to learn why they needed a sanctuary and a mediator. Before this building a tabernacle and an altar and all the other furnishings must have seemed like a lovely idea; but now they knew that they needed it desperately.

We may divide the chapter into four parts (as usual, there are other possible ways to do this): idolatry (32:1-6), intercession (32:7-14), judgment (32:15-29), and intercession (32:30–33:6). Of course, these sections are far more complicated than these one-word summaries reveal—but these words give an overview at least.

I. Impatience and weak faith lead to a foolish violation of God's Law (32:1-6)

The first part essentially records the making of the golden calf, a clear violation of the first two commandments of the Law. What prompted it was the impatience of a people with a weak, and rebellious, faith. Rather than wait for Moses to come back, they wanted to make a god to lead them. This same kind of rash folly occurs today. People do not like waiting for the LORD; they want some visible, physical reality, whether a sign, a seance, a “word” from the Lord—or an idol of some kind that they can see, handle, and understand. Idolatry takes many forms. Here we have to make a distinction, in view of the probable make-up of the audience in churches. Those who actually believe in the Lord cannot be idolaters, that is, first-class type, those who reject the Lord and worship another god. But there are people there who do fit the description; they may actually worship other gods, because the occult, satanism, the goddess sophia, and the like are all around.

But as T. S. Eliot says in “Choruses from the Rock,” many have left God for no gods they say, except the gods of usury, lust and power. These they look to for security, comfort, and meaning—leaving Christ out entirely. The application to them will be direct. The application to Christians will have to be indirect, a secondary application, i.e., they often live in the “spirit of idolatry,” claiming to trust Christ, but not walking by faith, or deriving their spiritual strength and comfort therein. The spirit of idolatry is greed and selfishness; Paul says idolatry is covetousness. Those who want to manipulate God (in any number of ways) to get what they want, a blessing, wealth, prosperity—that is pagan idolatry. The spirit of Christianity is surrender—and a life of service to do the will of God.

Aaron in our passage is the one who fashioned the calf out of the cast metal. He is certainly weak here, capitulating to the will of the people, and then giving some lame excuse to Moses. But he makes the idol—the high priest of Israel making an idol (a sign of things to come), and declares, “This is your God (possible: these are your gods) O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt.” They had wanted a god to lead them—so this calf is credited with the exodus and counted on for the conquest. They had left the pagan world of idolatry, or rather, they did not. Aaron saw what was happening too late and tried to turn it back by announcing that tomorrow there would be a feast to Yahweh. Did he really think they would see this calf and think of Yahweh? He probably now is trying to turn them back, but as later Israel would learn once idolatry was introduced, that is almost impossible.

II. Violations of the covenant require intercession to escape divine condemnation (32:7-14).

Two sections are to be discussed here: the LORD’s angry determination to destroy the people, and Moses’ intercession on their behalf. In the first God bases his anger on their disloyalty in this sin and their stubborn nature (7-10). But in the second Moses bases his appeal on God’s promises and reputation.

The theology here is important. God was actually prompting Moses to intercede for the people by telling him to stand aside so that he could destroy the people. If he wanted to destroy them, it made little difference where Moses was standing. But God was putting the future of the nation on Moses’ shoulder. So we learn here that God had never intended to kill the people; but his anger showed that they deserved to be killed, and his appeal to Moses showed that forgiveness was available. By saying that he would start over again with Moses was both a prompt for the intercession and a test. If Moses had been ignorant of God’s plan since

Abraham, or if he had been proud and self-seeking, he might have wanted to be the new father of the nation. But the expression reminded him that this nation had been built by God from one man already—and God did not do all that to destroy them now. So Moses made his intercession, and God ‘repented’ (an anthropomorphism showing the compassion of the Lord—he gave the appearance of changing his mind to teach that while God indeed ordains the end, he also ordains the means to the end, and that here is intercession). God’s anger reveals his intense hatred of the rivalry of idolatry, and his repentance reveals his compassion and desire to forgive. ***God desires that intercession be the means of turning wrath into compassion.*** The exposition, of course, needs to study the reasons that Moses gave for God not to destroy the people; they are profound. He knew that God wanted to make Israel into a kingdom of priests; that promise was sure—but whether this generation was going to share in that covenant was not clear.

Note the word for intercession—“made sweet (*wayhal*) the face of the LORD.” It is an idiom for “entreat” or “seek to conciliate” (cf. 1 Sam. 13:12; 1 Kings 13:6; Jer. 26:19; and Ps. 45:12; Prov. 19:6; Job 11:19). There are four motives for mercy: 1) Israel is the people of the LORD, 2) the redemption demanded a great power, 3) the mockery of Egypt if it all comes to nought, and 4) the oath to the ancestors.

III. Those spared of divine wrath must purge evil out of their midst (32:15-29).

Even though the nation is spared God's devastation so that they survive, there is discipline and purging through the mediator. In verses 15-24 Moses in anger destroyed the calf and made the people drink it; then he confronted the smooth talking Aaron. So first he removed the idol in a way the people would not forget, making them drink of their own sin. The gold could not now be used for the LORD’s sanctuary anyway.

But there was more evil. The people had been eating and drinking and playing (sensual if not sexual connotations) before this god. Moses called for all who were with him to stand up for the LORD. Those who did not, probably the ringleaders, had to be destroyed. So Moses and the Levites purged the camp of 3000 rebels who were apparently at the heart of the sin. The leaders of wickedness had to be removed. The nation would not always do this; it is done here at the outset for the future nation to know this is a death penalty offense. Ultimately, idolatry would destroy the temple in Jerusalem (thanks to Solomon), and it would doom the northern kingdom (thanks to Jeroboam’s golden calves), and later send the nation into exile again.

It may be worth mentioning that according to Deuteronomy 9:20 the LORD was angry with Aaron, threatened to destroy him, but that Moses interceded for forty days on his face before God.

One of the interpretations of verse 29 is that because the Levites sided with the LORD they were told, “fill your hand today to the LORD,” i.e., provide yourself with sacrifices that you may be installed as priests. If this is taken as the meaning, then earlier priestly activities of Levites must be explained.

IV. Those who purge evil from their midst find reinstatement through intercession (32:30–33:6).

The last part is more intercession for forgiveness and restored fellowship. It comes significantly after the nation demonstrates their renewed loyalty to God and remorse over the sin. The mediator of the covenant takes his appeal to God again.

Moses’ intercession for the sins of the people is marvelous. He is willing to die in their place. But no man can give his life as a ransom for others, as Psalm 49 makes clear. That costly task will belong to another mediator of a better covenant—one who himself is sinless and has no need of mediation, and one who is powerful enough to pay for the sins of the people—and live forever. Earlier Moses had asked that the people not be destroyed. Now he asks for their forgiveness.

The reference to the “book of life” is not here the same idea as in the New Testament. Here it is referring to the living, not eternal life. The LORD would destroy the guilty with death, but yields to Moses’ appeal for a putting off of the punishment.

The “book” is of course figurative, for God does not keep books—he is omniscient.

The passage ends with the people mourning the decision of the LORD to restrict His presence. So they repented and humbled themselves to find favor.

Conclusion

We can word an expository idea for this passage in this way:

***Serious violations of the covenant provoke the anger of God,
but impassioned intercession and the removal of sin procures forgiveness
and prevents condemnation.***

We can easily carry this over to the New Testament and the New Covenant. The intercession is now made by our mediator, Jesus Christ the Righteous; and the forgiveness, the appeal of the confession, is his blood that paid for our sins. For believers, there may not be a danger of eternal condemnation, but there certainly is the possibility that if they do not find forgiveness they will not be used by God, not receive his blessings, and perhaps die prematurely. For unbelievers, well the forgiveness is most urgent, and that can easily be explained.

Somewhere in here, or in passages like this, you will have to deal with what such rebellion and idolatry does to God's covenants. This will take some study on your part, but I think you will find the best way to explain it is that God's covenant promises, which he has sworn by himself, are sure and eternal; but individual participation in them requires faith and obedience. God made promises to Abraham and his descendants, and they are sure; but not all Israelites will have a share in them. In Exodus, God made the Sinaitic covenant with Israel and sealed it, so they they would enter the land as a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. But this generation sinned grievously, and they did not get to enter the land, not even Moses (this does not mean that none of them were saved). The next generation would enter (and so Deuteronomy), and they would have the opportunity to be that royal priesthood, and a blessing to the nations. But as you know, it was downhill all the way, in the Sinaitic Covenant, Palestinian Covenant, and Davidic Covenant as well. So God expelled them from the land. But did that mean God's covenant with them was over? Absolutely not. He announced at that lowest moment that he was making a New Covenant with Israel, and it would bring together all the promises of the other covenants and make them new and fulfilled as they were planned. And so God began to do that, starting to fulfill the promises by restoring them to their land. But they also failed, and did not see the promises realized. And when God sent his Son to fulfill the promises and establish their new covenant, they rejected him. Did God then write Israel and her New Covenant off because they rejected Christ? Absolutely not. Their rejection was part of the divine, and predicted, plan of God for the making of the New Covenant. Instead, a judicial blindness came upon ethnic Israel while God turned to the Gentiles (which was what Israel was supposed to do). That generation, and subsequent generations, did not share in their covenant because of unbelief. But we do, because we have been grafted into it. And Paul says that if their failure meant our salvation, think what their restoration will mean (Rom. 11). There will come a time when God will lift their blindness, and "all Israel will be saved"—those who are alive at the time. So in the meantime Paul was desirous that Israel come to faith in Christ, because anyone, Jew or Gentile, who dies without faith in the Lord, has no share in the covenant or

the world to come. And the fulfillment of the covenant promises will come with the second coming; for even though Christ is our King, he has yet to come and reign, and we with him on earth (Rev 5:11). Now the early Church took an unfortunate turn in their interpretation, thanks to the allegorical method of Origen, and his influence on Augustine, not to mention some shoddy exegesis by Augustine. But they introduced what came to be known as replacement theology, that the Church is the promised kingdom of Messiah. This had disastrous results: the Church had to be infallible if it was the Kingdom, the Church had to seize temporal powers if it was the Kingdom, and then there were the Crusades, the Inquisitions, and the persecution and slaughter of Jews (for centuries before Hitler came along), because they did not know what to do about the Jews. But in the last two centuries when Jews returned to the land and established the state of Israel, first in unbelief, and this was clearly in fulfillment of prophecy, then theologians began to realize that what Paul said was true, God has not cast them off completely. There is a future to all the promises of God, which will carry beyond the coming of Christ. But, individual participation in them requires faith in Christ, and the obedience of faith that the Lord will reward at his coming. So if you can get the big picture in mind, it helps understand how failures like Israel's are to be explained in the light of the covenant program of God. One of the best books to read for this overview is Ronald E. Diprose's *Israel and the Church* (Rome: Istituto Evangelico Italiano, 2000 [printed in USA by Authentic Media, Waynesboro, GA – authenticusa@stl.org]).