**THE EVENT OF THE GOLDEN CALF**

**(My Presence will go with you)**

June 20, 2021

Exodus 32:1-33:23

Key Verses 33:13-14 “‘If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.’ The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’”

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 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 second commandment. God was very angry. Only after 6 weeks after they promised on oath that they would keep God’s commandments, they broke the covenant. God wanted to destroy them and start over with Moses. Moses prayed for his people with a broken shepherd heart. Then God remembered his promise to Abraham, and relented and did not destroy them. But when God expressed his frustration with his people, saying that his Presence would not go with them to the promised land, Moses prayed for his people once more. Moses knew that without God’s presence, all the material blessings would be nothing. God listened to Moses’ prayer, and granted his request. May God help us to learn God’s mercy and Moses’ shepherd heart.

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.’” God called Moses up on the mountain, and showed him the pattern for the Tabernacle, the house of God. The Holy God chose his people Israel and intended to dwell among them, to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God’s plans for the Tabernacle were so detailed and complete that Moses needed to spend 40 days and 40 nights up on the mountain to receive them. But the people of Israel became anxious. It was not possible for a man to survive in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. Doubts began to creep in to the minds and hearts of the people. What if Moses had died? What if the Lord had abandoned them? Of course, they had seen the glory of the Lord on the mountain when the Lord proclaimed the Ten Commandments. But they were an undisciplined, slave people. They were used to following their feelings and their desires. As long as Moses was with them and they saw the Lord’s presence among them, they were OK. But now, they were getting shaky. They could not believe in God whom they could not see. They wanted to make a god whom they could see with their eyes. It is like someone who feels very uneasy if she goes out without cross necklace, thinking that some bad thing might happen to her.

Aaron had been left in charge. When people asked him to make a god for them, Aaron agreed because he gave into fear. He was afraid of the people. 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. A calf, young bull, was the most common idol in Egypt. It was a god of virility. Even today, it is worshipped as a god of prosperity. In the Wall Street in New York, there is a statue of a bull. When the stock market is doing well, it is called “bull market.” When the stock market is not doing well, it is called “bear market.”

Look at 32:7. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.’” God was so angry that he did not call the Israelites “my” people, but rather, “your” people. As we studied last time, God and his people entered into covenant relationship. Worshiping idols was like committing adultery. If a husband is not angry when his wife commits adultery, something is wrong. God loved his people and he was angry when his people were committing adultery. He said, “These people are a stiff-necked people” (9). Stiff-necked means stubborn and proud. The term “stiff-necked” comes from an ox. When an ox is yoked, the person in control steers and controls the direction of the animal by turning its head, either through the use of a bridle and bit or through the use of an ox-goad (a stick with a pointed end). A stiff-necked ox is one who continuously fights the person in control. It refuses to turn its neck. It goes where it wants to go and does what it wants to do. It is a dangerous creature and it can inflict great damage, injury and death on others if it goes wild. If such a creature, despite the continued efforts and training of its master, continues to disobey, it is put down. 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) God wanted to destroy them and start over with Moses. There could have been no Israel. Instead there could have been Moses nation.

But Moses could not be selfish; Moses was a man of integrity. He was a man of God. He prayed for his people. Look at 32:11. “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. Look at verse 32:14. “Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.” This is how we should pray. God hears prayers that are based on his promises. God’s promises in the Bible are for whoever believes and claims them. We claim God’s promises with prayer.

Moses went down the mountain carrying in his hands the precious Ten Commandments engraved by the finger of God on two stone tablets. Joshua was hopeful the people were doing something noble, but Moses knew better. Still, he wasn’t prepared for the shock he received when he saw the calf and the people going wild. He took the tablets, and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He broke them in despair. Moses then took the calf, burned it in the fire, scattered the ashes over the water and made the people drink it. It does not mean that Moses had them all line up and drink some as an organized group punishment. Rather it means that by putting the powder into their water supply, he saw to it that eventually the powder was drunk along with the water and thus went through the Israelites’ bodies, came out as waste, corrupted and defiled, and therefore was ruined permanently as material fit for an idol.

Moses was astonished at Aaron’s ineffectiveness as leader. But he didn’t waste time arguing with Aaron about what had happened. The people were running wild and becoming a laughingstock to their enemies. 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). All 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). This was radical surgery, but the cancer of rebellion against God had to be removed; otherwise the whole nation would perish. About 3,000 people died that day. It was costly and hard, but the Levites obeyed. The Levites did not go through the camp maliciously murdering innocent friends and family. They obediently killed those who insisted on being wild animals in the street. They killed those who made the choice to become and live as enemies of God. 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.

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. Look at 32:31-32. “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 people, the people of Israel.” (Ro 9:3). I don’t think I can say that; Take all my relatives to heaven, but leave me to hell instead. God heard Moses’ prayer and did not wipe the Israelites off the face of the earth.

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 would give them material blessings, but not spiritual blessings. God would keep his promise. He would give them the land flowing with milk and honey, but he would not go with them. Look at verse 33:4. “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 anymore, 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.

These days people think that if they have money and beautiful wife or husband, they would be happy without God. But Moses did not think so. 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.” The camp itself was defiled by the sin of the people, and so it was set up outside the camp. 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 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. Look at verse 33:14. “The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’” It is the Lord’s presence among his people that makes them different. Therefore, it is of first importance that his people remember this and plead for it persistently. This was precisely what the Lord wanted to hear, and he was glad, and said in verse 33:17, “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. Lord, be present with us as you wish to be! Help us to know you and to learn from you so that we might please you with what we do!

Then Moses made a bold request. Look at 33:18. “Then Moses said, ‘Now show me your glory.’” Moses realized that if he was going to lead Israel to the Promised Land, he needed to be changed. As God’s servant, he needed to see and reflect God’s glory. And the Lord was pleased to show it to him, although he could not see it fully. It is frightening and overwhelming to be in his presence. But this must be our greatest desire. We must overcome our fear by faith and earnestly plead for the Lord’s presence and glory in our lives. It is our living hope that we may be truly changed and made ready for eternity. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 says, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” The Lord’s presence in our lives through his Spirit is our freedom and our glory! May God bless us as his people to be transformed by his presence into his likeness, showing his love for God and for one another as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Big Idea: God’s Presence is the ultimate blessing