

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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God Versus “gods”

Exodus 32:1-10

Key verse: “[The Israelites] have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed it” (Exodus 32:8)

“Idolatry, whether ancient or modern, is...the futile attempt to look for our lives to anyone or anything other than the one true Creator and Provider. Whom do I thank when things go well? To whom do I look when things go badly? What is my source of security? Where do I gain my sense of worth in the world? What am I striving to achieve in life, and why? The answers to questions like these will help determine whether we are honoring God as God or whether we are idolaters—whether that means we are praying to a metal image as in Moses’ and Aaron’s day, drooling with envy over the car in our neighbor’s driveway, or latching onto the latest self-help strategy” (from *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* by Scott Hafemann).

The story of “the golden calf” in Exodus 32 is a memorable account of idolatry in the lives of the ancient Israelites. When Moses delayed his return from Mt. Sinai, where he received the Ten Commandments, the Israelites told Aaron: “Come, make gods for us...” (v. 1). They brought their golden earrings to Aaron, who melted them down and made an idol in the image of a golden calf (vv. 2-4).

Bible scholars are pretty much agreed that this idol was more accurately an image, not of a calf, but of a young bull. Some scholars believe the idol was the Egyptian bull-god, Apis. Others believe that the gold idol was an image of the Canaanite god, Baal. In either case, the young bull was a symbol of strength and reproductive power. It would have represented the ancient fertility cults of that time period, in which people often looked to these idols to prosper their crops and livestock.

Drunken orgies were also an integral part of these idolatrous religions. And it appears likely that the Israelites also participated in these practices: “They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, *and rose up to revel*” (v. 6, italics mine).

This episode was a clear violation of the second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship

them....” (Exodus 20:4). Although we are unlikely to bow down to any such golden calves in 2010, the “golden calf” story is one that, unfortunately, still lives.

As we read this story, one wonders at how easily the Israelites lapsed into idolatry and paganism. After all, God had miraculously delivered them out of Egypt. Yet, Moses leaves for a while, and they are suddenly worshipping bulls and engaging in drunken orgies.

However, we should not be too quick to judge them. Too often, God works mightily in our lives, delivering us from the slavery of sin and self. And we follow Him whole-heartedly for a while. But when trials or temptations come our way, we are prone to lapse back into old, ungodly habits and practices. Someone put it this way: God first has to get us “out of Egypt.” But then He has to get Egypt out of us!

It takes God’s grace working in our lives to set us free from the influences of our former lives apart from Christ. When we accept Jesus as our Savior, God “brings us out of Egypt,” so to speak. But we must continue to grow in God’s grace so that God can “get Egypt out of us.”

We are certainly not exempt from the temptation to idolatry either. Our idols in 2010 are rarely images of animals. Our false gods are more likely of a different sort. Today’s golden calves include:

The false god of “me”-ism. Whenever I put self on the throne of my life, I make it my idol.

The false god of success or popularity. We need only to observe the cult of celebrity, that is so common in our culture, to realize that success, fame, and popularity can become the golden calves of today.

The false god of pleasure-seeking. The Israelites “rose up to revel.” For many today, pleasure and play come way ahead of God.

The false gods of materialism and money. Rich and poor alike bow down to this modern golden calf.

Here is the good news: God’s grace is able to keep us from bowing down to the idols of our time. We must make Jesus the Lord of our lives. Stay close to Him. Love Him supremely. If we do, we will find that the same grace that first brought us “out of Egypt” is also able to “get Egypt out of us.”

Thanks be to God!

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