

Sin at Mt Sinai

From Sinai to Canaan

Study 2

Warmup



There are many things that wound the heart, like bereavement, broken promises, false accusation, harsh words, ingratitude, and betrayal. Can you add to this melancholy list? Out of all the things here listed and mentioned, which do you think hurts the most?

Introduction

When God spoke the Ten Commandments to the Israelites who were assembled before Him at Mt Sinai, He summoned Moses to the top of the mountain to receive them as the covenant in writing. Forty days later Moses returned to the people with the Commandments in his hands, and grief in his heart, for God had informed him that the people had descended into idolatry. To add to the grief, Moses discovered that his own brother Aaron had been complicit and responsible. Exodus 32 records this miserable incident involving the worship of the golden calf.

Read Exodus 32:1-24

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." ² Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord."

⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. ⁷ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' ⁹ "I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ But Moses sought the favour 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? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.' " ¹⁴ Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. ¹⁵ Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp." ¹⁸ Moses replied: "It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear."

¹⁹ When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. ²¹ He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?" ²² "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. ²³ They said to me, '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.' ²⁴ So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"



First Impressions

Record some of your own first impressions about the passage you have just read.

Question 1

As the chapter opens, Moses had been away on the top of Mt Sinai for 40 days; hence 40 days prior, the Israelites had received the Ten Commandments audibly by the voice of God, in a scene of overwhelming awe. (Not to mention that three months prior to that, the Israelites had crossed through the Red Sea in a spectacular way (Exodus 19:1)). What then, is so wrong about the impatience and perverse request of the people (32:1)?

Question 2

Aaron perhaps represented the LORD as a bull, to match the bull idols that were worshipped in Egypt (known as Apis bulls), or perhaps the image was suggested to him by those who gathered around him. What does such an image communicate about (i) the position of God? and (ii) the character of God?



Question 3

Evaluate Aaron's counsel to the people (v2-5). Evaluate also his excuse when he is confronted by Moses (v21-24). (How good that we have a more faithful older brother! (Heb 2:11)).

Question 4

(v10) Evaluate God's response to this act of gross idolatry, particularly in light of his previous mercies to the Israelites, and of the Covenant that He had just made with Israel, and of the clarity the second commandment.

Comments:

(1) It seems at first reading that Moses is 'calming God down'. We need to be careful in our exposition not to breach the second commandment ourselves, by imagining that God had lost control.

(2) In this passage, and in the one following, Moses is functioning in the role of a mediator. His powers though seem to be limited (32:35; 33:3). However, the One who will come after him will successfully plead for sinners and for their pardon!

Question 5

There is a famous quote from C S Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, where we are challenged not to think of God as if He were some tame pet. In response to a question about whether the Lion (who represents Jesus) is safe, comes the famous response: "Of course He's not safe, but He's good." What is helpful about this observation? What needs to be kept in mind, with respect to the second commandment, about representing Jesus as Aslan the lion?

Question 6

When Moses pulverized the golden calf, why do you think he made the offending Israelites drink the powdered gold (32:20)? When you and I sin, what are we sometimes reluctant to do?

Question 7

The story (from verse 25 onwards) goes on to report that there came upon the Israelites a great penalty for their mistake. It makes for hard reading, and includes the capital punishment of many people, along with a plague. The apostle Paul refers to this incident in first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 10, where he counsels the Corinthian Christians to take warning:

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test the Lord, as some of them did, and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroying angel. ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ 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 also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. ¹⁴ Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.

Write down some things that we are to learn from this passage from the verses below:

(1) (Verse 6) _____

(2) (Verse 12) _____

(3) (Verse 13) _____

(4) (Verse 14) _____

Question 8

If idols are images (metal or mental) that stand in the place of God, and compete for the devotion that rightfully belongs to God, what areas in the 21st century do Christians need to be vigilant about with regard to idolatry?

The Book of Hebrews, at 1:3, tells us: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." How is this verse helpful in our fight against idolatry?

Conclusion

Many books of the Bible, and especially the New Testament epistles finish with a stirring benediction or doxology. The apostle John however finishes his first letter with these cautionary words: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). Reflect on why John decided to conclude his letter in such a fashion.