

## LESSON 24 THE GOLDEN CALF

**READING:** Exodus 24:12-18, 32; Acts 7:37-41

**AIM:** To show the conditions prevailing in Israel when Moses received the Law and the design of the Tabernacle at Sinai.

### 1. BACKGROUND

When Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Law he was also given a design of the Tabernacle. Chapters 25 to 31 of Exodus describe the explicit details of the design, while chapter 32 describes **events in the camp of Israel** at the same time.

We shall return to the Tabernacle, its design and significance, in the next series of lessons. Meanwhile, for forty days and forty nights Moses accompanied by Joshua, who was left at a lower level, stayed on Mt. Sinai. Before going, Moses had left Aaron and Hur in charge of the people.

Now, day after day, week after week went by and Moses did not return. What had become of him? Had he lost his way? Had he perished for want of food? Had he been consumed by the presence of God? Well nigh six weeks had gone: there seemed no hope of seeing Moses again.

A great change came over the people of Israel as they waited, seemingly in vain, for the return of their leader. Doubtless at first they were anxious about him, but as time passed anxiety gave place to impatience and finally to blatant idolatry.

### 2. ISRAEL BREAKS THE SECOND COMMANDMENT - Exodus 32:1-6; Acts 7:38-41

Israel decided to abandon the leader who had brought them out of Egypt and had been their mediator and God's mouthpiece. In so doing they denied God who had delivered them from bondage and sustained them during their journey through the wilderness.

**“Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him!”** (Exodus 32:1; Acts 7:40).

Compare their attitude now with what it was only seven weeks before, when they had been terrified when God spoke to them from the Mount and had pleaded with Moses to speak with them rather than God, “lest we die”.

Aaron was weak enough to comply with Israel's wishes for “gods which will go before us”, fearing the mischief they might make, rather than being strong in the Lord. Taking their golden ear-rings he melted them down and moulded a golden calf which they worshipped with the saying “these be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt”.

The following day Aaron proclaimed a feast day to the Lord and rising early in the morning the people came and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings on an altar erected in front of the calf. How grossly evil the people had become in the absence of their leader. In worshipping the calf they had:

- (1) Broken the second commandment which said **“thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth ... thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them”**.
- (2) **Shown how extremely weak** and sinful they were in adopting the idolatrous ways of Egypt at the first sign of difficulty by the way.

### 3. **MOSES PLEADS FOR ISRAEL - Exodus 32:7-14; Acts 3:22, 7:37**

God told Moses what was happening in the camp and that He was so angry that He determined to destroy Israel and start a new nation from Moses.

Moses interceded for his people, whom he knew to be weak and sinful. He saved them from destruction by pleading with God to remember the honour of His Name among the nations in not letting them perish after their deliverance from Egypt. He appealed because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give their seed (Israel) an inheritance in the Promised Land.

What a humble loyal leader Moses was and how unselfish in not grasping the honour and glory of a new nation starting from him! God's respect for these qualities is shown in His hearkening to Moses and the staying of His hand from slaying Israel (compare Numbers 14:20).

At this appropriate moment we stop to reflect upon the depth and breadth of Moses' character, to see him for the great man he was. He was, in fact, one of the greatest men who ever lived and the nature and execution of his special mission lead us inevitably forward in thought to the Lord Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 10:1-4; Acts 3:22, 7:37; Deuteronomy 18:15, 18).

Moses was a servant (Psalm 105:26) a chosen one (Psalm 106:23) a man of God (Psalm 90) a prophet (Deuteronomy 34:10) a shepherd (Psalm 78:52) a mediator (Exodus 34:2) a deliverer (Exodus 3:10) a lawgiver and ruler (Deuteronomy 34:4-5) and yet like Jesus he was the meekest of all men (Numbers 12:3). The apostle Peter provides a fitting exhortation to us **“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time”** (I Peter 5:6).

### 4. **MOSES RETURNS – Exodus 32:15-24**

Moses went down the mountainside carrying the two tablets of stone on which the Law was written with the finger of God. He was joined by Joshua and as they neared the camp they could hear the people shouting for the god that Aaron had made. Joshua thought it was the noise of war but Moses knew that it **was not so**.

When Moses saw the extent of Israel's sin, he was so angry that he broke the tablets of the Law that God had given him. Turning on the golden calf he burnt it with fire and ground it to powder, mixed it with the drinking water and thus compelled the Israelites to drink the cause of their sin.

Moses blamed Aaron for leading the people astray and he in turn lamentably blamed the people. How badly Aaron appears with his lame excuses compared with the righteous indignation of Moses! Aaron sought to place the blame on others – on the people who asked him to make the “god” and his apparent ignorance of the design of the mould that produced “this calf” (Exodus 32:22-24).

How true this is of human nature, when trying to escape from a difficult situation to place the blame either on other people or on the circumstances in which they find themselves. But both Moses and God knew where the responsibility lay.

#### 5. “WHO IS ON THE LORD’S SIDE” - Exodus 32:25-35

Moses appealed to those who were prepared to stand for the things of God, to stand with him. His own tribe of Levi did so: with sword in hand they went through the tribes of Israel inflicting a punishment of death upon about 3,000.

But God’s anger was still not appeased, for Israel’s sin was very grievous. It was only by the constant pleading of Moses that finally He forgave the people and promised that He would send the angel of His presence to guide them to their inheritance. Moses offered that his own name should be blotted out of God’s book of life to secure this end.

Moses was told to go up into the Mount again with two new tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written as before.

#### 6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In all the things that happened to Israel there is a strong warning to us (I Corinthians 10:6-13). Moses was called upon to leave Israel for a time and ascend into the Mount.

The Lord Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven, where he intercedes for those who approach God through him. It is possible for us to be like Israel and to tire of his absence (Matthew 24:42-51; Mark 13:28-37).

We may doubt whether he will come again, as they doubted. We may give ourselves over to pleasure as they did. We may be as unready for the return of Christ as Israel was for the return of Moses.

And then, instead of receiving his blessing and commendation, we will witness only his anger and receive his condemnation. We must resolve to be busy, doing the will of our Master when he returns, ever **WATCHING**.

#### REFERENCE LIBRARY

“The Visible Hand of God”, chapter 16  
 “Moses My Servant”, chapter 5.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What happened in the camp of Israel while Moses was in Sinai?
2. Describe Moses’ reaction when he came down from Sinai and saw Israel’s idolatry.

3. As we wait for Jesus what lesson do we learn from Israel's waiting for Moses to return from Sinai?
4. How did Israel break the second commandment when Moses was absent in the mount?
5. What lessons do we learn from Israel's sin in making and worshipping the golden calf?
6. Compare the characters of Moses and Aaron as exhibited in events of the golden calf.