

## Wilderness Gleanings 7 - The Golden Calf

### A threefold iniquity

It was while Moses was upon the Mount receiving the Lord's commandments regarding His house, that the people in cooperation with Aaron broke the first moral commandment. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

**Exodus 32:1-5:** "And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, 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. And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me. And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron. And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, these be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."

#### The iniquity identified

This occasion marks one of the darkest days in the history of Israel (the darkest being its rejection of the Messiah, the Son of God).

It is, as many have noted an instance of idolatry. But we fail in interpretation and understanding if we stop here. There are other shades of iniquity at work.

Here in the shadow of Mount Sinai we observe the degeneration into *idolatry*, *apostasy* and then *blasphemy*.

- **Idolatry** is the setting up of other gods and graven images as objects of worship – the molten calf.
- **Apostasy** is the act of renouncing God – "these be our gods."
- **Blasphemy** is ascribing the works of God to others – "these be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (cf Matt 12:24).

Yet that is not the end of the people's wickedness. Aaron built an *altar* to these gods. The people under bondage were deprived of an altar in Egypt (as in Babylon). But as the *liberated* redeemed in the wilderness they erect an altar to *other* gods. Furthermore, Aaron instituted an unholy *feast* calling it "a feast unto Jehovah", using the sacred covenant name of God.

#### The reason for the iniquity

What caused this threefold cord of iniquity to arise? Some have said that the delay in Moses coming down from the Mount created unbelief, ingratitude and even opportunism among the people. There is merit in such a notion in that his apparent delay and the idleness among the people provided a catalyst for their iniquity. But we need to go a little deeper to identify the real cause.

#### *Carnality*

The root of the iniquity lies in the *carnality* of the people – their worldly and fleshly desires which were *democratically* determined and which blinded them to the *redeeming glory* of God. This carnality was not confined to the people. It contaminated Aaron, a failed leader among them. His position conferred legitimacy and liberty to the sin of the people. Just three months earlier, as an emancipated people on the banks of the Red Sea they testified in song of a redeeming God who is "glorious in power" and "glorious in holiness." The redeeming *power* of God was more than crushing the enemy and leading them towards the Promised Land. It was the ability to do so by rolling back the sea; by sweetening the bitter waters of Marah; by providing manna from heaven and

water from the smitten rock at Rephidim. They lost sight too of God's redeeming *holiness* and their emancipation from Egypt, both of which required the sacrifice and shed blood of a spotless lamb. The very promise of their redemption was made on holy ground circumscribed by pure grace such that the bush was not consumed. God called unto Moses out of the midst of the burning bush and He said, "draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground...And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:5-8). Sadly, the people in their carnality had lost sight of all this, and so idolatry, apostasy and blasphemy followed as night follows day.

### **Practical application**

We must recall that the sin of Israel was the sin of a *redeemed* people who, because of their *carnality*, lost sight of the glory of God - His redemptive power and His holiness. It is to the redeemed in Christ that John issues warnings against idolatry. After reminding the believer of the glory of God in Christ he exhorts the believer to keep away from idols.

"And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn 5:20-21).

Paul too has a vital word to say here. The believers at Corinth were carnal, pursuing worldly ways and wisdom (1 Cor 3:3). It is no surprise then that he brings before them the failure of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, for "all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition" (1 Cor 10:11).

"Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (1 Cor 10:7).

He underlines his exhortation by reminding them of the redeeming glory of Christ.

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16).

He had previously reminded them of the redemptive glory of Christ as our Passover sacrificed for us, and in the light of this truth to combat their carnality.

"Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Cor 5:7).

Paul broadens the warning and includes partaking of anything that comes from the "table of demons."

"Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils [demons]" (1 Cor 10:21).<sup>1</sup>

The Lord's Table and the table of demons are contrasted as places where food is provided. From the former we get our daily spiritual food, typified in the manna from heaven (not the old corn in this case as we are in the wilderness). From the latter we get food to satisfy the flesh – typified in the leeks, onions and garlic of Egypt. The food from the former edifies the spirit and encourages reverent worship and praise of God; food from the latter energises the flesh and excites irreverent behaviour. "And the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play" (Ex 32:6; 1 Cor 10:7). In the eyes of the flesh, playing is loved and praying and praising God is loathed. Finally there is a solemn warning to those who lead the Lord's people. Their leadership carries weight among the people of God and so Paul exhorts them to *first* "take heed unto themselves" (Acts 20:28).

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<sup>1</sup> The Lord's Table is to be distinguished from the Lord's Supper.