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**Session 16**

***God of Freedom,* Week 9a**

**Exodus 32**

**22-23 January 2024**

**The Ease of Sin –** We have heard repeatedly throughout this course that the first half of Exodus is about getting Israel out of Egypt, while the second half is about getting Egypt out of Israel. The incident that we see in Exodus 32 highlights just how important that is. We tend to be shocked at how easily—and quickly—the Israelites abandoned God’s leading and fell back into idolatry with all its horrific habits, but the truth is that sin tends to feel more “natural” to all of us than righteousness does. It has only been about three months since the new nation of Israel left Egypt, but Moses has been up on Mount Sinai for about half that time…and the people think that he is probably dead. They are at least convinced that he isn’t coming back, and they demand that Aaron make them a set of (comforting) idols, like the ones they had seen throughout Egypt.

**The Golden Calf Idol –** In response to their demands, Aaron tells them to bring him gold jewelry—gold which God had intended be used in the Tabernacle He has designed for their worship—and he uses it to create an idol. Have you ever wondered why he chose to make a calf idol? Aaron knew that one of the chief deities back in Egypt was Apis, the bull god. And he was probably aware that one of the chief deities in Canaan was also a bull. But notice that Aaron doesn’t form his idol into a full-grown bull: he chooses to make an idol shaped like a young calf, i.e. a less threatening, more comfortable version of these false gods.

**Diminishing Yahweh –** We talked earlier how any image intended to represent God in reality *mis-represents* Him. It diminishes who He is, making Him less in every way. For example, this calf idol was small, but God is immense. The idol was inanimate, but God is spirit. The idol was location bound, but God is everywhere fully present. The idol was created, but God is the uncreated Source of everything. The idol was new, but God is eternal. The idol was impotent, but God is omnipotent. The idol was destructible, but God is indestructible. The idol was of minor value, but God is of infinite value. The idol was blind and deaf and mute, but Yahweh sees and hears and speaks and acts. So why would Aaron even consider doing such a thing? He is an example of the proverb that “the fear of man lays a snare.” (Proverbs 29:25)

**God’s Purpose –** When God threatened to consume the entire nation, Moses pleaded with Him to spare them, reminding God of the promises He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. And the text records that “God relented”. So did God change His mind? When we change our minds about something, it is generally either because we receive some new information that we hadn’t had before, or that someone more powerful than we are forces us into some course of action we hadn’t intended. But God is both omniscient and omnipotent: He already knows everything and is all-powerful.

He cannot be convinced of something He didn’t believe nor coerced into doing something He didn’t want to do. So what is really going on? **God is testing His servant Moses.**

**Symbolic Gestures –** When Moses threw the stone tablets down so forcefully that they shattered into pieces, he was showing the people symbolically what they themselves had done. They had broken God’s good and perfect Law. And when he had the calf idol burned and ground into powder that he threw into the water and made the people drink, he was saying, “Egypt is *in* you.” This act is also suggestive of what God said when He cursed the serpent back in Eden, saying, “You will crawl on your belly all of your days, and you will eat the dust.” And when Moses confronted Aaron and demanded an explanation for his actions, Aaron did what Adam and Eve had done before him: he shifted the blame from himself to “the people,” portraying himself as an innocent victim of their evil intent.

**The Seriousness of Sin –** We need to be reminded again of *the importance of our presuppositions* when we read an account like the one found in Exodus 32:25-29. Rather than question the goodness of God when we read of His severe judgment, we need to tell ourselves, “God IS good. Therefore, how is this a good thing?” 3000 men died because of their idolatrous, perverted sin. But bear in mind what Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount: “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out! And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off!” God is willing to go to whatever length it takes to keep sin from multiplying in the camp and contaminating everyone. Some commentators believe that the 3000 who died were those who rebelliously continued in their revelry even as they were being called to stop. But even if that were not the case, recall that there were over 600,000 Israelite men who came out of Egypt, which helps us to put the number 3000 in perspective. This is God making a very painful and pointed example with a relatively small number of men for the purpose of waking His people up to the seriousness of what has occurred.

**Moses’ Intercession for the People –** Moses pleaded with God to forgive His people, and said that if that wasn’t possible, then to blot himself out of God’s book along with the rest of the people. (This reminded me of the time that Paul wrote that he could wish that he himself be cursed, if that would gain salvation for his fellow Israelites.) God assured Moses that his name would not be blotted out and that He would deal with the people’s sin at the appropriate time in an appropriate way. So Moses was a good mediator…but a better Mediator was to come! Under the old covenant, if someone behaved like Egypt, they were judged like Egypt. So God sent a plague on the sinning Israelites, just as He had on the Egyptians. But we today, even if we behave like Egypt, have a Mediator who was judged on our behalf, and He ever lives to intercede for us.