



# STUDY SERIES

## Week Seventeen: The Golden Calf - Marc Rader

### Bible

#### Exodus 32:1-6 (NIV) The Golden Calf

<sup>1</sup> 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."

<sup>2</sup> Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> 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, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

<sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." <sup>6</sup> 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.

# Sermon Outline

As Moses is up the mountain with the Lord receiving the instructions for the tabernacle, things are very different at the foot of the mountain. The people approach Aaron, Moses' brother and soon-to-be high priest, and ask him to make a god for them. If this request – in contravention of the second commandment – is strange, Aaron's quick willingness is even more so. The action, in contrast to the Tabernacle, is told with a minimum of detail. Aaron's golden calf set up to represent the Lord, with Aaron declaring a festival to the Lord complete with fellowship offerings and a banquet. This breach of the covenant jeopardises the whole enterprise and introduces a dramatic tension in the closing chapters of Exodus. The Lord informs Moses about what the people have gotten up to and declares that He is going to destroy this corrupt, stiff-necked people who have been so quick to turn from His commands.

What follows is an invitation to reflect on the character of God. It is ultimately the character of God that is central to the renewed relationship and even here we see three aspects of God's character that are worth reflecting on.

First, His holiness or moral purity. When I was reading this passage I was struck at how minor the Israelites actions appear in comparison to what they would eventually get up to. The context of Exodus 32 – the terms of the covenant still ringing in their ears and Moses receiving the instructions for God's dwelling among them – is part of what makes this act of unfaithfulness so memorable. But on the surface it doesn't appear to be an act of deliberate rebellion or great wickedness. Instead it appears to be a sin born of laziness and impatience. If you want a point of comparison, read through 2 Kings where idols from other nations filled the temple of the Lord and the city of Jerusalem was filled with bloodshed and injustice. Is the Lord's reaction here a bit of an overreaction? Not at all. It is so easy for us to rank sins and see some as worse than others. This allows us, of course, to compare ourselves to

other people rather than to the Lord's holiness. Compared to those around me I might be a pretty unimpressive sinner; not getting up to anything too evil. But compared to the Holy One even my beige sins take on a different light. Any sin, like that of the Israelites, is serious because we are in a relationship with the holy God.

Second, we are invited to reflect on the Lord's faithfulness. In this case, His faithfulness to His promises and purposes that means that He takes the failures of His people seriously. This is His faithfulness to punish, because the purposes He has invited His people into are too important. While the punishment that eventually comes on Israel is hard to read, it would have been worse if the Lord had said it didn't really matter. That what He was on about wasn't that critical, and that their lack of faithfulness wasn't of much importance. The Lord is committed to His purposes, and the faithfulness of His people is critical too. His purposes are so important, that Jesus died to enable our faithfulness to them.

Third, we are invited to reflect on the Lord's mercy. This is expressed in the Lord's declaration that He intends to destroy the people. This declaration invites Moses to intercede for the people; drawing on the Lord's plans, purposes, and promises. We must be careful not to read this as the Lord getting played by a quick thinking prophet; manipulated into showing mercy when He was really intent on destruction. If the Lord was intent on destruction He was under no compulsion to tell Moses; He could have simply done it. Instead there is an invitation to intercede which opens the door for mercy to be shown.

What I find so striking is that the sin of the people leads to a reflection on the character of God and invites us to consider our response. We are those who, like Israel, have been brought into a relationship with the holy God. We are invited to participate in His plans that are so important He sent his son to fulfil them, and who continually shows us mercy in the face of our unfaithfulness. In this case, what is the appropriate response? The people of Israel end up mourning as they wait to hear what will happen to them, but

they do not repent. In the passage to follow, we see that this puts the ball firmly in the Lord's court to redeem the relationship. This is still true today, but we are also called to confess and repent of our faithlessness with gratitude and continue to seek to be as faithful as we can be as we participate with God.

## Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. Often we can get lost in Bible **study**, missing God's invitation to be shaped by what we read. The objective here is to engage in a conversation around a Biblical idea, and begin to consider its implications for our everyday lives. Where God might be inviting us to act. Take some time to pray and invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time.

1. **Opening Discussion:** Are there 'levels of sin?' How bad is 'really bad?' How do you evaluate 'sinfulness?' Share your reflections with the group.
2. **The Bible Together:** Read **Exodus 32:1-6** together aloud. Invite the Holy Spirit to open your eyes and ears as you read the passage. What stands out to you? What don't you understand? What is God inviting you to do? What might you share with someone else? - Share your thoughts with the group, commit to exploring God's invitation to you, and resist the urge to provide answers to all the questions others might have.
3. What inspired the people of Israel's desire for 'physical' gods?
4. How does understanding the grand purposes of God, make sense of His reasons for the discipline and punishment of His people?
5. In the context of this passage, the sin the Israelites committed by casting a golden calf, is in part, one of boxing God in, or limiting Him. Where and how in our lives do we box God in, or limit His faithfulness?

6. As Marc described, the account of The Golden Calf highlights the faithfulness of God, in contrast to the sinful lack of faithfulness from His people. Where specifically in our lives, could we demonstrate greater faithfulness to God?

## Prayer

Take some time to pray for each others' answers to questions 5 and 6. Invite the Holy Spirit to build our trust in God's faithfulness, and to strengthen us for greater faithfulness to God.