

Worship the King

Part 2 – Better Than Gold

“In a world that is so pervasively religious, proclamation must characterize all acts of worship.”
- Allen Ross

Exodus 32

A great deal of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) is given to the institution of and rules governing the people’s worship of God. The long chapters of regulations regarding the manufacture of the tabernacle and its furniture that followed Exodus 24:11 fit well with Leviticus. Exodus, up to that point, had been an historical narrative but at 24:12 it became a manual of worship. Those regulations were received by Moses from God while upon the top of Mt. Sinai. The regulations regarding sacrifices with which Leviticus begins were also given by God to Moses on the mountain.

Main Idea: Worship is the believing and obedient response of God’s people to God’s revelation of Himself through His Word.



Vs.1 – Moses has been gone by this time almost 40 days. The top of the mountain had all the while been alive with lightning and thunder. The people may have thought that he was dead. Israel explicitly asks for “gods.” Yahweh seems to have disappeared with Moses. They desired new gods to help them.

Impatience with God was part of Israel’s undoing. They weren’t willing to wait for the Lord’s will to unfold, no matter that Moses had told them to wait for his return. No doubt they were also afraid, as the “who will go before us” indicates. They were facing the prospect of being stranded in the wilderness with no one to lead them. [Alter, 493] This indicates unbelief, something God will not tolerate from his people.

Vs. 4 – The NIV translates “calf,” perhaps primarily because we are so used to hearing of the “golden calf.” The English word “calf” suggests a gamboling little animal, but the Hebrew term actually refers to a young bull that has reached adult size. In Gen. 15:19 the word is used to describe a three-year-old animal. And in Ps. 106:20 – which is a retelling of this same history – the NIV renders the same word simply as “bull.” A calf, as we picture such an animal, would not be a normal image in ancient idolatry. [Cassuto, 412; Ellison, 169]

“These are your gods...” raises a question. The word אֱלֹהִים, “God,” can be translated, as it always is in reference to Yahweh, in the singular. But then a singular verb is used even though the form of the noun is plural. When that happens, as it does thousands of times in the OT, it is an instance of what is usually called the “plural of majesty.” [Cf. Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 7.4.3.b] But here we have a plural verb with *elohim* which makes it necessary to translate the noun “gods” not “God.” But Israel here made only one idol, one golden bull. Why, then, “gods?” Certainly it is a parody of 20:2 – “you shall have no other gods before me” – and perhaps that explains the plural. We have the same singular idol and plural “gods” in v. 8. Or perhaps there are thought to be more than one god represented by the single idol.

Vs. 5 – Aaron makes matters still worse by building an altar. Israel had as yet no altar. The one described in chapter 27 had not yet been built. So Aaron acts to develop an entire practice of worship without God’s

guidance, indeed, in direct violation of God's law. He is going to worship Yahweh in precisely that way Israel has been forbidden to use.

"...to the Lord," that is, "to Yahweh," suggests that, whatever the people were thinking by asking for "gods," Aaron himself was not intending to exchange the worship of Yahweh for the worship of some other god. He meant merely to worship Yahweh in a more accessible way, in that way common to the peoples of that time and place. Israel didn't want to be different from the peoples around her; she wanted to be the same. Just as later she would want a visible rather than an invisible king; now she wants a visible god to worship.

Vs.13 – You will notice that Moses' reply is quite different from the modern sentimentality we would be likely to hear from church leaders. He doesn't excuse their conduct or find reasons for it. He accepts the harsh judgment the Lord has made about Israel and her behavior and pleads instead God's honor and his promises.

Vs.14 – The ESV's *relented* is literally "repented" (ἠνάνη). It is an anthropomorphism – the action of God described in human terms – but is very important and meaningful. **It does not mean that God changed his mind**, in the sense that he came to believe that what he had formerly planned to do would be a mistake. It means that God would pursue a course of action from that already suggested as a possibility, owing to some new factor.

What we learn from the failure of Israel about the ways that we corrupt worship...

1. We corrupt worship when we diminish the place of God's Word.

- At Sinai the people became frustrated and angry over the fact that Moses was meeting with God receiving more words. They desired a worship experience that more closely resembled the worship of the nations. They desired a worship that maximized sense experiences and diminished the pronouncements of God. They rejected the mediation of God's Word in favor of idols that could be physically experienced.
- Exodus 19:7 sets the pattern of faithful worship. That is, worship is the believing and obedient response of God's people to word of God.
- Keeping God's Word central to worship helps ensure that God remains the object of our worship. Through his word, we hear God speaking as he reveals himself, proclaims his law and announces his gospel. It is the centrality of the word of God which guards the essential pattern of proper worship: God speaks, we respond.

2. We corrupt worship when we turn our preferences into demands.

- God has determined how he is to be worshiped. Our ways and imaginations are corrupted by sin. When we determine the ways in which God is worshiped we inevitably end up worshiping an idol.
- In the Bible we are told what God calls for from his people – Reading and proclamation of his word, singing, prayer, giving tithes and offerings, the sacraments. To worship God in other ways may gratify us but it will not glorify God.
- Creativity and artistic skills are a blessing that can and should be given for the glory of God. However the worship of God is never to be shaped by our preferences, our skills, our intuition, our art, or our emotional needs. The worship of God must be shaped by his requirements.

3. We corrupt worship when we reject God's means of mediation.

- God had chosen Moses to be the mediator between Himself and the people. This meant that God was going to speak to the people through Moses. At first this satisfied the people. But by the time of this event, the people had tired of not having direct access to God. So they rejected God's chosen mediator and sought to craft their own pathway to God.
- Ultimately Moses could not be the mediator that the people needed. Moses could not die on behalf of the people's sins. There would have to be a Mediator who was himself sinless and able to atone for the wickedness of the people.