



## Sermon, Sunday July 21, 2024 “The Golden Calf”

**SCRIPTURE: Exodus 32:7-14** <sup>7</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; <sup>8</sup>they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ” <sup>9</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. <sup>10</sup>Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, and of you I will make a great nation.” <sup>11</sup>But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup>Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup>Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ” <sup>14</sup>And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

### Introduction: Exodus and Law

Moses, one of the most brilliant figures in Israel's history, had two of the greatest achievements in Israel's history. One is the Exodus, and the other is the Law. The Exodus was an event that established the identity of the Israelites politically, and the acquisition of the Law was an event that established their identity religiously.

The Israelites reach Mount Sinai three months after leaving Egypt. Moses went up this mountain according to the command of the Lord. The Lord gave the Law, including the Ten Commandments, to Moses on Mount Sinai. From then on, the Law became the standard for determining all life, including Israel's religious life. Today's text is about what happened when Moses received the Law from the Lord.

### Body: The Israelites who made the Golden Calf and Moses' petition for them

After giving Moses two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments on them on Mount Sinai, the Lord said: **“The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”.** (Exodus 32:7,8) Next, the Lord told Moses that he would destroy the Israelites.

What happened at the foot of Mount Sinai that made the Lord so angry with the Israelites? The incident that occurred at the foot of Mount Sinai appears in the previous paragraph of today's text.

While Moses was on Mount Sinai to meet God, the Israelites, who were staying on the plain below Mount Sinai eagerly waited for Moses. The Israelites began to become anxious when Moses, whom they had been eagerly waiting for, did not come down from the mountain. At that time, Moses stayed on Mount Sinai for 40 days.

The Israelites anxiously went to Aaron, Moses' elder brother, and made the following request: **“Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”** (Exodus 32:1)



Moses' elder brother Aaron must have been very embarrassed when he heard this request from the Israelites. This issue was not something he could decide on his own. However, Aaron could not ignore the people's demands because this could have caused a conflict in which all the Israelites would be scattered.

So, Aaron gathered all the gold earrings of the people and made a golden calf. When the Israelites saw the golden calf, they shouted, **“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”** After sacrifices to the golden calf the Israelites ate, drank, and rose up to revel.

The Lord saw this of the Israelites. The Lord thought there was no more hope for the Israelites and told Moses that he would destroy them all.

In fact, whenever we read or hear stories like this in the Bible, we wonder what kind of God we believe in. Many people wonder why the Lord, who is love itself and is merciful, cannot understand people's circumstances and acts in such a terrible way. In the Bible, other than today's text, there are many stories about a scary Lord who is angry and judges.

In fact, we cannot fully understand these words and actions of the Lord as described in the Bible. We must leave the things of the world that we cannot fathom through our knowledge until the end when the Lord returns. However, despite these limitations, we must learn little by little what the Lord's wrath and judgment mean.

If we think that the Lord's wrath and judgment are antithetical to love, we are wrong. For example, parents may discipline their children for their misbehavior in the hope that they will grow up well. It can be difficult and painful for children to understand and accept their parents' discipline. However, in time, children realize that their parents' discipline was love for them.

The Lord's wrath and judgment toward Israel are often an expression of His love for them. If we are to understand, if not fully, the Lord's wrath, chastisement, and judgment, we must know that the Lord is our Creator and that we are His creatures. The Lord's creation of the world has meaning. There is a reason why the Lord chose the Israelites.

Despite our arguments for understanding the Lord's wrath and judgment, however, we can ask the following questions: ‘Is it really a sin worthy of death that the Israelites made a golden calf, offered sacrifices, ate, drank, and rose up to revel?’

This act itself is not a mortal sin. At that time, most people living in the ancient Near East practiced religion in this way. They created wonderful sculptures for worship god. They were not satisfied with an invisible god, so they created a god they could see. In this way, not only the Israelites but also other Gentile's nations at the time made golden calves. But why is it okay for the Gentiles to be okay, but is it necessary for all the Israelites to be exterminated?

To understand this part, we must think about the relationship between the Lord and Israel. Israel has had a deep covenant relationship with the Lord since the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The fact that they have been specially loved and chosen by the Lord means that they have a special mission to fulfill.

That mission is to serve the Lord correctly and to let the world know that the Lord is the only true God. For this mission, the Lord called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and liberated Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, from Egypt. The Lord prepared the Law for them.

However, as soon as the Israelites began living in the wilderness, they made a golden calf and served it in the same way as the Gentiles. These actions of the Israelites were a fundamental break with the covenant with the Lord. The Lord decided that there was no other way than to destroy them all.

Moses was very embarrassed when he learned of the Lord's will. Moses petitions the Lord for three reasons to prevent the Israelites from being destroyed. First, he says that if the Israelites are punished, the Lord's act of salvation through the Exodus becomes null and void. Second, he claimed that if the Lord destroys the Israelites, they will be laughed at by the Egyptians. Third, Moses argues that the Lord must keep the promises he made to the ancestors of the Israelites: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Today's text says that after hearing Moses' plea, the Lord relented His will and did not annihilate all the Israelites.



Why did the Lord change his plan to destroy the Israelites? Was it because of Moses' plea for the Israelites? Or maybe there was another reason?

To answer these questions, we must know the historical background of the golden calf incident in today's text. The golden calf incident in today's text occurred immediately after the Exodus. A similar incident occurs again in Israel's history. That incident occurred early in the history of Israel's division between North and South.

Northern Israel was founded by Jeroboam, a general during the Solomon era who lived in exile in Egypt. He opposed the David and Solomon dynasties and established Northern Israel. Israel was divided into South and North, competing.

The national power of Northern Israel was much greater than that of Southern Judah, but there was one critical problem. It was that Solomon's temple was in Jerusalem, the capital of southern Judah. Because of this, the people of northern Israel had to go to southern Judah, where Solomon's temple was located, to offer sacrifices. From Jeroboam's perspective, he was very anxious and did not like the idea of his people going to Jerusalem in southern Judah, an enemy country. So Jeroboam made two golden calves, placed one in Bethel and the other in Dan, and declared to the Israelites: "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." (1 Kings 12:28).

Additionally, Jeroboam selected and appointed priests for the high places from among the common people at his own discretion. The Bible writer testifies that because of these things Jeroboam did, his house was destroyed from the face of the earth. (1 Kings 13:34).

The Bible writer portrays Jeroboam as a vicious king in Israel's dynastic history. The Bible writer's assessment was not because Jeroboam was incapable. From a political and economic perspective, he was a successful king. However, he was not a king who ruled the country out of love for his people according to the justice of the Lord. Jeroboam made golden calves and set them up in Bethel and Dan solely for his own selfish political purposes.

## **Conclusion: God's Love and Grace**

According to the explanations of biblical scholars, the golden calf incident of Jeroboam and the golden calf incident at the foot of Mt. Sinai are deeply related. The golden calf incident implies that we can never escape God's judgment. This means the Lord's unchanging judgment on sin. Additionally, the golden calf incident in today's text shows us what our attitude in life should be. The worship of the golden calf refers to all human thoughts and attitudes that seek to worship and rely on material things other than the Lord.

So the idea that money is the greatest value in our lives today is extremely contrary to the will of the Lord. This does not mean that being rich is a sin. This means that it is a sin for us to make money absolutely. Risking our lives on anything other than the Lord is an unforgivable sin.

Therefore, the Israelites who made the golden calf in the wilderness also had to die, just as the Jeroboam family was destroyed. This is the foundation for establishing the Lord's justice in the world.

In the end, 3,000 people die due to the Golden Calf incident. Fortunately, not all Israelites died. This was possible because the Lord changed his mind to destroy everyone.

This is the love and grace of God the Father, who gave his Son on the cross for us. Even if the Lord's absolute nature is damaged, He sometimes changes His thoughts to save people's lives. The Lord is unchanging in the ultimate purpose of love, but He is free and able to bring about change in the process and method of achieving it.

When we turn from doing what is not pleasing to the Lord and doing what is pleasing to the Lord, the Lord's good response will be given to us. I hope we experience this grace of the Lord abundantly in our daily life. **Amen!**

