

THE GOLDEN CALF

Exodus 32:1-24

The teachers should review chapters 19, 20, and 24 in order to have clearly in mind the sequence of events from the time of the arrival at Sinai to the incidents of our lesson for today. Moses has been up and down the mountain more than once. Note especially 24:18, which introduces the situation in chapter 32. In all the classes stress the fact that all the people had heard the commandments given by the voice of the Lord from the mount, and that they had several times promised to obey.

Doctrinal Points

We must guard against setting up anything as our supreme object in life except service of the Lord.

The Lord uses the weaknesses of the people in the Bible story to show us our weaknesses.

We are just as liable as the Israelites were to believe only what we can experience with our physical senses.

Love to the Lord and the neighbor are the only feelings which can be trusted to keep us straight.

Notes for Parents

All through their forty years of wandering in the wilderness the children of Israel were led by a miraculous pillar—of cloud by day and of fire by night. They knew it was the presence of the Lord with them, and they were to go wherever it led them, to camp where it stopped, and not to move on until it moved. The Lord is always with us, leading us from one experience to another. Everything which comes to us is something the Lord sees we need—sometimes for our encouragement, sometimes for a warning, and sometimes for a test. The important thing in life is not what happens to us but what we do about it.

From Rephidim the pillar led the children of Israel to Sinai. This was a steep and high mountain with a great plain at its foot, on which the whole people could camp. They were kept there for eleven months, and in that time the Lord gave them through Moses all the laws for their life, and for their worship, laws which changed them from a mere horde of people into an organized nation, and established the Israelitish Church.

The first thing given them was the ten commandments, which all the people heard spoken by the voice of the Lord from the top of the mountain, amid thunder and lightning. These laws had always been known, but the people had to be shown—and we have to see today—that they are not man-made laws but divine laws on which all happy life must be based. They can never be changed or broken without harm resulting.

To receive the other laws and instructions, Moses was several times called by the Lord to the top of the mountain. The last time he remained up there hidden in the cloud for forty days and forty nights, and the people decided he was not coming back. We all tend to have more faith in the things we can see and touch than in unseen things, although we know that even in nature it is unseen forces—like gravity and electricity—which have greatest power. The golden calf of our story for today is a picture of the successes and pleasures of this world when we set them up as the supreme object of life. Read the story with this in mind and you will find in it a wonderful lesson the Lord is teaching us.

Primary

The story is simple and dramatic. Tie it in with the giving of the commandments. Tell the children that one of the principal idols of the Egyptians was the calf.

You remember that the children of Israel were led out of Egypt in a wonderful way. The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They were told to follow the pillar wherever it went, whether it moved by day or by

night: and when it stopped, they were to stop and camp, and not to go on again until the pillar moved on.

When they left Rephidim the pillar led them to the wilderness of Sinai, a great plain at the foot of a steep mountain. They had been on their journey about three months. The pillar stopped in front of Mount Sinai and the people camped, and they remained there for nearly a year.

What did all the people hear the voice of the Lord speak from the mountain top?

Moses was called to come up to the top to receive the commandments and many other laws and instructions for the life and worship of Israel.

Some of the elders, including Joshua, went part way up with him, but not to the top.

Moses was gone forty days and forty nights.

The people had promised to obey the Lord in everything.

Did they keep their promise?

When they thought Moses was not coming back, what did they ask Aaron to do?

What idol did he make for them?

What did he use to make it?

What did Moses have in his hands when he came down from the mount?

When he found the people worshipping the golden calf, what did he do with the tables?

What did he do with the golden calf?

Junior

The teacher should have a picture of Mount Sinai to show to the class, and should be sure all the pupils know how the commandments were given, why the first tables were broken, and that the second tables were hewn from the foot of the mount. Discuss with them the reason why the people wanted a visible idol to worship, and our likeness in this to the Israelites.

Mount Sinai is a wedge-shaped mass of rock rising steeply out of a large plain. Its top is between eight and nine thousand feet above sea level. The mountain mass is two miles long and one mile broad, and the plain at the foot is about two miles long and half a mile broad—some four hundred acres in extent. The air in that region is wonderfully clear both for seeing and for hearing.

The ten commandments were spoken by the voice of the Lord Himself from the top of Mount Sinai amid thunder and lightning and smoke, and all the people heard them. Read Deuteronomy 5:22-24. Then Moses was called up into the mountain to receive these same laws written by the finger of the Lord upon two tables of stone cut from the top of the mountain, and to be instructed in all the laws which the people were to obey, particularly as to their worship. He was given also the directions for the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings. As we read all these instructions in the chapters of Exodus, we find that they were not all given at once. Moses came down several times to instruct the people, and each time they all agreed to obey all that the Lord had commanded. When Moses went up, Joshua was his attendant and was allowed to go part way with him, and waited for him on the mountainside. This shows us that Joshua was closer to the Lord than most of the people, which is something we want to remember. Aaron and Hur were left in charge of the people down on the plain.

But the last time Moses was called up, he stayed in the cloud on the mountaintop for forty days and forty nights, and the people decided that he was gone for good. They forgot all the wonders the Lord had showed them and all that they had promised. Does this seem strange? Did you ever learn something new in Sunday school which made you feel very enthusiastic about being good? How long did you stay good? Perhaps you forgot even more quickly than the Israelites did.

What did they ask Aaron to do?

They were used to seeing idols worshiped in Egypt, and one of the principal Egyptian idols was the calf. They wanted a god they could see and touch. It seemed more real to them. It is hard for many people to believe that anything they cannot see and touch is real, even though they know that the most powerful things in nature itself are invisible forces.

What did Aaron take to make the idol?

In what other story have we heard of earrings?

How did Aaron make the calf?

Read verse 4 of our chapter and then verse 24. When Moses rebuked Aaron, Aaron tried to make it seem as though he had had no real part in making the idol. Do we ever try to “get out” of something in this way?

What was Moses carrying when he came down from the mountain?

What did he do with them?

What did he do with the golden calf?

How did he punish the people?

Moses was very angry, but still he prayed to the Lord to forgive the people.

After this the Lord had Moses hew out two tables of stone from the foot of the mountain and bring them up to the top, and then the Lord wrote the commandments again on these new tables and Moses took them down to the people. These were the two tables of stone which were afterward kept in the ark.

Then the Lord made a covenant or agreement with the children of Israel. They were to worship the Lord alone and to destroy idols wherever they found them. They were not to intermarry with the people of the countries through which they passed or in which they lived. They were to offer to the Lord the first fruits of all their cattle and crops. And they were to observe each year three great feasts: the Passover, the “feast of weeks” at the time of the early wheat harvest, and the feast of the ingathering at the end of the year when all their crops were safely gathered in. So the Lord tried to help them not to forget Him again, and He promised that if they would do these things faithfully, He would bless them. All the Lord’s commands are given for our good, so that He will be enabled to bless us and make us happy.

Intermediate

The correspondence of idol worship and of the golden calf in particular should be made the central emphasis of the lesson. Point out also why the first tables had to be broken, and why the second tables were hewn from rock found at the foot of the mount.

The ten commandments were given by the voice of the Lord amid thunders and lightnings, and all the people heard the Lord speak them. They were not new laws. People had always had them and they are embodied in the laws of every nation in the world, but they are laws which we should recognize as God-made, not man-made. They cannot be broken anywhere or at any time without spiritual as well as natural harm resulting. This is why they were spoken by the Lord from Sinai.

Then the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mountain and gave him many other laws to give to the people. If you will read over the chapter headings of chapters 21 to 23, you will see what they were like, and they are given in still more detail in the book of Leviticus. They were for the most part what we call civil laws. In their letter they apply to the Israelites, but in their spiritual sense they are for all men for all time.

Then Moses went up again to receive the directions for their worship—the plan and furnishings of the tabernacle, the clothing of the priests, and the required offerings—and finally he was given two tables of stone on which the ten commandments were written “with the finger of God.” During this last period of instruction, Moses withdrew into the thick cloud which covered the top of the mount, and was there for forty days and forty nights. Forty pictures a full period of temptation. When any temptation persists, we are likely to reach a state in which we feel we cannot resist it any longer. The Israelites, imagining themselves deserted by Moses, finally wavered in their allegiance to the unseen God and wanted something tangible to worship. In much the same way, we may come to feel that spiritual virtues are shadowy, and that worldly success is the only real aim in life.

Cattle were favorite idols in Egypt. This was because the Egyptians loved the good things of this world and worldly learning, and cattle represent external or natural goodness and its affections. When cattle cease to perform the uses for which they are intended and are instead set up as objects of worship, their correspondence becomes evil. So the idol which Aaron made represents the fact

that the Israelites cared more for the things of the world than they did for the Lord and His service.

We often read in the Bible: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Hearing represents obedience, and these words really mean, “If your mind is open to the Lord’s teaching, obey it.” Golden earrings represent the happiness which results from obedience to the Lord. But when we become worldly and selfish, this happiness is lost. So when the golden earrings were separated from the ears of the people, they became a golden calf. Do you remember where we have heard about earrings before? It was in the lesson about Jacob’s return, when he had the people take off the earrings they had worn in Haran, and buried them under an oak in Shechem before they could worship the Lord truly at Bethel. The earrings worn in Haran represented the former natural state of their motives.

The two tables which Moses first brought down were of stone from the top of the mountain. They picture the commandments in the high spiritual form in which the Lord would like to give them to us. But the Israelites were in no state to understand or appreciate spiritual things, and so the first tables were broken. The second tables were hewn by Moses from the foot of the mount and carried up to be inscribed. These picture the present hard, external form of the commandments, the only form in which they could make any impression on people in low worldly states.

After Moses broke the first tables, he destroyed the golden calf, but the powder to which he reduced it was sprinkled on water and given to the Israelites to drink. This is a picture of the fact that, although the people of the Church from that time on observed in their external form all the laws given them through Moses, the spiritual truth which was within them was falsified by worldly and selfish loves.

Basic Correspondences

forty = a full state of temptation
the calf = the love of external good

Senior

The worldly and selfish state of the Israelites and our own liability to drift into this same state are the points to be brought out clearly in this class. As the Seniors go out into the world, “Moses” is very likely to seem to “vanish into the cloud on top of the mount.” If they get a clear picture now of the temptation involved, they will be more likely to recognize and resist it when it comes.

The children of Israel had been in the wilderness about three months when they came to Sinai and camped in the great plain before the mount. Historians point out that the ten commandments were embodied in the laws of ancient peoples before the time of Moses, and so some people discredit the story of the giving of the commandments by the Lord from Sinai. But this is not a logical conclusion. If the commandments are the laws of God, they are basic laws which must always have been known and followed in every orderly social group. The Israelites were a people who had been living in slavery without any government of their own, and who had forgotten even the name of the true God. They were also a people who had lost all desire for any but earthly satisfactions. So the Lord could direct their history without interfering with their spiritual freedom. Because their interest was centered in externals, He could lead them through fear of punishment and hope of reward to establish an external pattern of worship in which by its correspondence He could maintain His connection with mankind until the time came for His own Advent into the world.

Our story for today tells this fact in symbolic form. And it shows us also how the Lord deals with us when we are in worldly states. Moses, we remember, represents divine law, the truth as it comes to us in the Word. Moses had been called up into the mount to receive instructions for the building and care of the tabernacle. Joshua was allowed to go part way with him, and Aaron and Hur were left in charge of the people. Moses disappeared into the cloud on the top of the mount and was gone forty days and forty nights. In much the same way, sometimes our sense of the direct leader-

ship and power of the Lord seems to vanish, and we are left to the guidance of our religious training and our habitual moral code. In these times, when our spiritual life seems at a low ebb, we are liable to go astray and to fall into worldly thoughts and loves. Forty pictures a full state of temptation.

Cattle represent our affections for worldly uses—business, professions, art, music, scholarship, science—all of which are good so long as they are made to serve the Lord and the neighbor, and not set on a pedestal to be worshiped for themselves. The calf pictures the love of learning about such worldly uses. So here the worship of the calf is the setting up of worldly success as the all-important things in life. Anyone who is too busy pursuing his profession or his art or his business or his pleasure to read the Word or to go to church is a worshiper of the golden calf.

Then Moses comes down from the mountain. Our state is suddenly exposed to the judgment of divine law. Moses has in his hand the two tables of stone on which the commandments had been written by the finger of God. These picture the divine laws as they come to us from the Lord, the basic laws of a happy life. But the Israelites have become incapable of recognizing any values except earthly ones. The first tables must be broken. The idolatry which has been set up must be destroyed, but the truth can be given only in a defiled form, falsified by the selfish loves which the people have allowed to take possession of their lives. The golden calf, burnt and ground to powder, is sprinkled on the water which the people will drink.

After the destruction of the first tables and of the calf and the punishment of the people, described in the last part of chapter 32, Moses was again called up to the mount. He was told to hew two new tables of stone from the foot of the mount and bring them up with him that the same commandments might be written on them. This is told in chapter 34. People often ask why the Word of God is given in such a harsh form instead of in a high, spiritual way. This story is the answer. The first tables were cut by the Lord from the top of the mount. This pictures the truth in the high and

spiritual form in which it proceeds from the Lord. But the people had turned from the worship of the Lord, as people do today, and were not in a state to receive spiritual instruction. So the first tables had to be broken and new ones hewn from the stone at the foot of the mount. The same commandments were to be given, but they had to be given in terms adapted to the low, worldly states of the people. So, too, at the end of chapter 34 it is recorded that when Moses finally came down from the mount, his face was shining, and that he had to veil his face before the people would come near him. In our selfish and worldly states we will not listen to the truth in its higher and beautiful forms, but must be kept in order by harsh commands and threats: we cannot bear to look upon the truth in its purity.



Adult

After reviewing very briefly chapters 19-31, it may be well to read aloud Exodus 24:12-18, as it forms a good basis for the introduction of the principal points in our story for the day. The important lesson is the insidious effect of neglecting the study of the Word and the writings and assuming that we can live good lives without such study.

We think of Sinai as the place where the ten commandments were given. The Word tells us that the mountain was covered with smoke, that there were thunder and lightning, and that all the people heard the living voice of the Lord speaking the commandments from the top of the mount. The objection which historians sometimes offer—that the commandments were not new with the Israelites but have been found embodied in codes of law existing before the time of Moses—in no way invalidates the account given in the Word. The commandments are the basic laws of order on which society has been founded from the beginning. They were known through perception by the people of the Most Ancient Church and through revelation by the people of the Ancient Church. They were embodied in the Egyptian code. But by the time of the Exodus men had forgotten that they were divine, not

man-made laws, and what is regarded as man-made is subject to change by man. We have plenty of evidence of this in the attitude of our modern world toward the ten commandments. Every one of us needs spiritually to hear the voice of the Lord speaking the commandments. They are divine laws. They are not only laws of outward order, but spiritual laws which cannot be broken without spiritual harm, whatever popular sanctions may do to weaken their outward observance and effect.

In considering our story for today, we should note that the commandments have been given, that Moses has been up and down the mountain more than once, receiving instruction from the Lord and bringing it to the people, and that each time the people have pledged themselves to obey the Lord in all things. But now Moses and Joshua have both been in the mount a long time. We should read verses 12 to 18 of chapter 24 to get the background of our lesson, recalling that Moses represents divine law as it is given us in the Word, Joshua “the truth fighting,” Aaron the law as it comes to us through the church, and Hur the religious principles which we have confirmed by our own meditation and experience.

If ever we say to ourselves, “I really don’t need to read the Word regularly myself; I was brought up on it and I hear it in church, and after all I can’t understand it very well,” Moses—spiritually understood—has withdrawn into the cloud on the top of the mount and we do not know what has become of him. Or if we say, “I haven’t time to study my religion to see just how I should apply it; I know my principles are good and so I’m not likely to do anything really bad,” Joshua has also left us and is somewhere up on the mountainside waiting for Moses to come down. Finally, if we say, “I’m a member of the church in good standing and respected in the community; that’s enough for me,” Aaron and Hur have been left in charge of us.

What had happened? Moses had told the people to go to Aaron and Hur if they had “a cause” (24:14) while he was gone. They went to Aaron, but not for direction or advice. They said to him,

“Up, make us gods, which shall go before us.” And Aaron proceeded to make them a god out of their own earrings. We remember that when Jacob returned from Haran and was commanded to build an altar at Bethel, he prepared his people for worship by making them put away their strange gods. Genesis 35:4 tells us: “And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.” The ear signifies obedience, and earrings the delight of obedience. In the Jacob story and again in our story today, the obedience and its delight were those of external and worldly loves.

When Moses later rebuked Aaron, Aaron said (verse 24): “And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.” So Aaron disclaimed responsibility. But the fact was different, for verse 4 tells us concerning Aaron and the earrings: “And he received it at their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf.” Swedenborg says (AC 10406) that this forming with a graving tool, when said concerning an idol, is “to prepare false doctrine from one’s own intelligence, which is effected by the application of the sense of the letter of the Word in favor of the loves of self and the world; for when these loves reign, the man is not in any enlightenment from heaven, but takes all things from his own intelligence, and confirms them from the sense of the letter of the Word, which he falsifies by a wrong application and a perverted interpretation, and afterwards favors such things because they are from himself.”

The golden calf is what results from this process. The calf represents “external or natural good,” and the calf as an idol represents the setting up of “natural or sensuous delight” as the supreme object of life. That is, when we no longer depend upon the Word as our constant guide, and cease to make use of divine truth to expose and overcome the evils within us, these evils inevitably take possession not only of our hearts but of our minds; our worship is performed from motives of self-love, and our minds seek

and accept only such things as agree with that love.

Then Moses and Joshua returned. We are suddenly confronted with divine truth and its judgment. How often this happens to all of us! We go along smoothly in our accustomed ways and build up a pleasing image of ourselves; then some story or quotation from the Word strikes home and brings us face to face with our real selves.

In our story two things happened. In the hand of Moses were the tables of stone hewn by the Lord from the top of the mount and inscribed by “the finger of God” with the ten commandments. Moses broke these tables. The Lord would prefer that we receive the commandments as laws of love, in their high spiritual form. But our minds are functioning on a low plane. The tables on which the commandments were later written—the ones which were placed in the ark—were hewn out by Moses from the foot of the mount. The letter of the law had finally to be given in the harsh form in which alone it would be listened to by the Israelites and by all in selfish and worldly states. And, although the golden calf was destroyed, the powder to which it was reduced was mixed with the water which the people drank. We may be brought to recognize and reject the principle of worldliness and self-interest, but the falsities which have come from it, like the dust of the golden calf, continue to mingle with the truth which enters our minds. So long as we are in this world we should see and acknowledge that there is an element of self in everything we think and do.



From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 10407: “The ancients, who were in representative worship, knew what was signified by the various kinds of animals; for each animal has its signification, and according to this they appear in heaven, consequently according to this they are mentioned in the Word, and also according to this they were employed in burnt-offerings and sacrifices. By a ‘calf’ is signified the good of innocence and of charity in the external or natural man (nn. 9391, 9990, 10132); but when there is no good of innocence and of charity, as is the case with those who are in externals without what is internal, then

by a 'calf' is signified natural and sensuous delight, which is the delight of pleasures, of cupidities, and of the loves of self and of the world. It is this delight in which are those who are in externals without an internal, and which they worship, for a man worships that which he loves above all things. They do indeed say that they worship the God of the universe, but they say this with the mouth and not with the heart. Such persons are meant by those who worship a molten calf. The Egyptians were such above all others, and they, being in the knowledge of correspondences and of representations above all other nations, consequently made for themselves various idols, as is evident from the Egyptian idols which remain to this day. But their chief idol was a calf, whereby they wished to signify their external good in worship. When however the knowledge of correspondence and of representations, wherein they were versed above others, was turned among them into magic, then a calf put on the opposite signification, which is the delight of external loves; and when a calf was placed in their temples and worshiped as a god, it signified such a delight in worship. As the Israelitish nation brought with it from Egypt this idolatrous thing, therefore as applied to that nation, when a calf was worshiped by them as a god, it signified the delight of the loves of that nation in worship."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. How long did the Israelites camp at Sinai? *almost a year*
P. What did all the people hear the Lord speak from the top of Sinai?
commandments
J. What other instructions did the Lord give Moses for the people?
laws of conduct, worship
P. Where did Moses go to speak with the Lord? *top of mount*
P. In our lesson today, how long had he been gone? *forty days*
J. What did the people think? *gone forever*
J. What did they demand of Aaron? *gods*
P. What did Aaron tell them to give him? *gold earrings*
P. What did he make for them? *calf*
P. What did Moses have in his hands when he came down from the mount?
two tablets
P. What did he do when he saw the people worshiping the golden calf?
broke them
J. What did he do with the calf? *melted, ground, sprinkled on water*
J. How did Aaron try to excuse himself? *threw gold in fire, calf came out*
I. What is pictured by the golden calf? *love of worldly success and pleasure*

S. What is the difference between (1) the first tables of stone, and (2) those hewn our later from the bottom of the mount?

(1) high, spiritual form of law

(2) law adapted to state of worldly men