

[R5297 : page 253]

THE GOLDEN CALF

– *SEPTEMBER 21. – EXODUS 32:15-20,30-35. –*

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols." – 1 John 5:21.

THE Israelites experienced a severe trial of faith and obedience soon after they had entered into covenant relationship with God. In their trial they failed utterly. The Covenant was broken. However, after punishing them, God renewed the Covenant with them. This constituted a fresh manifestation of Divine Mercy.

The circumstances of this testing are a part of this lesson. Moses, by Divine direction, after the making of the Covenant, went up into Mt. Sinai, taking with him Joshua as his servant. He was gone forty days – a comparatively long period, under the circumstances. The Israelites felt themselves very much like children in the hands of Moses. To them he was God's representative in a very special sense. His prolonged absence gave room for the cultivation of faith, patience, trust. [R5298 : page 253]

They remembered the trying experiences through which they had passed. The Egyptians and slavery were behind them; the Amalekites, who already had attacked them, were still their enemies and might renew the attack. What would they do in the absence of Moses whose upheld hands had brought them God's favor and prosperity in battle?

Here worldly wisdom came in. Aaron, the high priest, the brother of Moses and his representative in leadership, was perplexed as to how to keep the people from utter discouragement, fear, etc. They seemed to need and to call for a representative of God visible to their eyes. They apparently were unable fully to trust to the God whom they could not see, after His special representative, Moses, was out of their sight.

The leaders of the people took counsel together and determined that they would make a representation of Jehovah – an image which the people, looking upon, could use as an instrument of worship. We are not to suppose that the Israelites recognized the golden calf as their God Jehovah, but used it merely as a symbol, or representation, just as the heathen use idols as representatives of their gods, and just as some Christians consider it proper to use the crucifix as a representation of Christ – not to worship, but merely to assist the faith and to hold the attention.

Today's lesson seems clearly to indicate that God was greatly displeased with their symbolical representation of Himself. This was one of His commands given to the Israelites: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness" of God, or of anything, to bow down before it and worship it as a symbol of God.

MAKING THE GOLDEN CALF

We are not to suppose that the calf was made of solid metal. It is not at all probable that all the jewelry of all the Israelites, gathered together, would have been nearly enough to make a calf of any size of solid metal. The supposition is that, after the manner of that time, the calf was made either of clay or wood and then laminated, or covered over with the molten metal – the gold which had constituted the jewelry of the people. This in turn doubtless was graven, or tooled. Having made the idol, the people rejoiced in it as an evidence of God in their midst. They gave themselves up to a season of frolic – singing, dancing, feasting.

This was the condition of things at the end of the forty days spent by Moses in the mount with God. As he came down from the mountain with the tables of the Law, he heard the shouts of the people, and then beheld them worshiping the golden calf and offering sacrifices and incense to it. Moses was angry. He was the mediator between God and Israel – the representative of both. He had a right to be angry; for he was charged by God with the

responsibility of that nation, and he realized that a serious crime against the Divine Covenant had taken place during his absence.

Moses dashed the tables of stone – the tables of the Law – into fragments, indicating that the Covenant was broken. He went down to the people, angry against them, as God's representative. Armed with Divine authority, he let fall upon them a just penalty for their departure from God and rapid retrogression into sin.

Still, as the representative of the people, Moses was a patriot of the highest order. He went to God in prayer, and besought that if the penalty of this sin was the casting off of his people he might be blotted out instead. This was in response to God's proposition that Moses alone seemed to be loyal, and that God would make of him the nation who should inherit the promises made to Israel. Such patriotism as Moses here evinced has surely not often been equalled. It meant loyalty to his work as Israel's representative and mediator, and at the same time loyalty to God, whom he also represented.

"KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS"

Let us now apply the lesson to Spiritual Israel. After the Christian has left the world, the slavery, the sin, after he has passed the bitter experiences of Marah, after he has had manifestations of God's favor, after he has partaken of the Bread from Heaven, after he has entered fully into Covenant relationship with God – there comes a time when he must walk by faith, and not by sight. He is being proved by the Lord. If he fails in this lesson, as the typical Israelites did, it will be a serious matter for him.

We are not meaning to suggest that any Christian would be liable to make a golden image literally. We do mean to say, however, that this matter of making images, and of allowing them to divert and absorb our worship of God is one of the greatest trials and tests which comes to Spiritual Israelites. The golden calf which

some set up to worship is business. They give themselves wholly to it, sacrificing their time and energy. They treat it as a god. The love of money and of the things which money can procure leads into idolatry, and thereby breaks their covenant with the Lord.

Others idolize the opposite sex, and give all that they possess for its favor and fellowship. They worship the creature more than the Creator, as the Apostle explains. They are making a great mistake. Jesus declared this, saying, He that loves father, or mother, or children, or self or any other creature more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Still another idol is to be noted – the idol of sectarianism. St. Paul warned against this idol, saying, "One of you says, I am of Paul; another, I am of Apollos; another, I am of Peter." (I Cor. 1:12; 3:4.) Then he inquires, Is not this reverencing of men a form of idolatry? putting it, "Are ye not carnal?" The same principle we may apply to ourselves today, and guard ourselves against sectarian worship. If one says, "I am of Calvin"; another, "I am of Luther"; another, "I am of Wesley"; etc., are not these evidences of carnality? And worse than this, is there not danger of worshipping the human institutions which bear these human names, and thus of having something to come **[R5298 : page 254]** between the soul of the Christian and his God? We believe that there is a serious danger along this line. We urge Spiritual Israelites that they cease to worship the creed idols, and that all God's children turn from idols of every kind, and worship and reverence God alone.

The tendency to formulate and reverence the creeds instead of the Bible has been manifest ever since the first one was made – the Nicene creed – A.D. 325. Every creed tends to take the place of the Bible, just as the Talmud does with the Jews. Jesus spoke against this, saying, "Ye do make void the Word of God through your traditions."

The creeds of Christendom are our Christian traditions respecting the Truth. God's intention evidently was that His people should have no creed except the Bible as a whole. They were to believe all of the Word of God and to search the Scriptures daily, to ascertain its teachings. Thus God's people were to grow in grace and knowledge, as would not be possible were creed idols to be set up and divert the attention of the Lord's people in various directions.

