

Exodus 32:1-14 (October 11, 2020)

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32When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “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.” ²Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they 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!’” ⁹The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now 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.” ¹¹But 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? ¹²Why 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. ¹³Remember 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.’” ¹⁴And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Historical Context

The people’s idolatry in Exodus 32:1-14 comes soon after Exodus 20, in which God makes a covenant with the people of Israel and gives them the Decalogue to serve as the heart of that covenant. The Ten Commandments established a powerful ethical bond between the people and their God and between the members of the community.

Theme: God Sticks with Us

Nearly every day in the news we are reminded that, as a whole, humanity (*we!*) fall short of God’s will for us. That is not shocking news anymore. The more shocking and profoundly hopeful news here is that God sticks with us; God continues to claim us as God’s own despite it all. Instead of God’s wrath burning hot against us and consuming us (vs. 11), God’s beloved son reminds us there is joy when even one sinner repents (Luke 15:10).

Instead of waiting for a Moses to intervene on our behalf, we might ourselves pray the Psalmist’s prayer as our own, “Create in us clean hearts, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us” (Psalm 51:10).