

Oops! Have We Built a Calf?

By Natalie Warner

“Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’”

(Exodus 32:1 NASB)

The Israelites were tired of walking by faith. Yes, they had witnessed the plagues in Egypt. Yes, they had seen the Red Sea part. Yes, they received instruction from God through Moses. However, the Israelites forgot that the Lord’s faithfulness does not run out; He continues leading whether we lose sight of Him or not. After all, when they left Egypt, He *“was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night”* (Exodus 13:21). Does God only lead or seem apparent in our good days? When things are going swell? We may be more apt to notice or to be thankful for Him in those times, but we cannot and should not neglect to watch for His Hand in the darkness, too. For, *“He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people”* (Exodus 13:22). Do we replace Him in our hearts, minds, and lives if we grow weary of walking by faith in the darkness? Think of how easily the Israelites strayed, and they had seen the Lord’s presence with their own eyes—more than most of us have!

“Aaron said to them, ‘Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’”

(Exodus 32:2-4)

When we look elsewhere for our hope and salvation, we are having a god before Him. If we put our trust in man alone or in something other than Jesus Christ for our eternal security, we’re forming for ourselves idols. Now, this is not to say that we cannot utilize things of the world to assist us – for example, choosing eyeglasses for our failing sight or medication for our sickness. What we need to never forget though is that the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. What is our motive? Where is our hope placed? Are we doing this or that under God’s sovereignty, or are we usurping Him?

This is a common trait in the world. Take for example the so-called atheist. Atheists, by definition, don’t believe any sort of god exists (a = without, theist = god). However, if they were to contend that, they would have to admit that nothing created everything, which defies the very same laws of science that they base their belief on. An honest atheist will admit that he does believe in *some* god (science, humanity, or aliens, for example), just not THE true God. It follows, then, that he is not an atheist but an agnostic (someone who believes in a god, just not sure which one). Agnostics don’t want to believe in the true God, because if they did, they would be morally accountable. Instead, so-called atheists and agnostics make up a god that suits themselves. Atheism is a religion in itself. They make their gods cozy and comfortable and tolerant of sin—a golden calf fashioned from their own sinful imaginations. Romans 1:18-25

describes these unbelievers:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over to the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

According to Scripture, they are without excuse! How much more so are we! And yet, we do the same thing as the atheist when we grow tired of not seeing the Lord and create a golden calf for ourselves—an idol we feel comfortable and secure with. We alter in our minds what God’s personality so clearly is and put ourselves in control. Yet when we suffer, we make Him out to be cruel and somehow to owe us an explanation. I’m guilty of this myself. I grow tired of waiting and watching for Him, wondering why this thing is happening here or that thing there, and I start forming a golden calf in my mind to help ME “cope,” to help ME “understand.”

“Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.’”
(Exodus 32:5)

I wonder if Aaron was justifying the idol by convincing himself that it was just a joke—that they were all still obeying the Lord, just letting off some steam. After all, in view of the calf and the altar, Aaron was planning on making a feast to the Lord. In the same way, we Believers also justify our idols before God. We convince ourselves they’re innocent, they’re just sitting on the sidelines, and they’re in no way between us and God.

However, before the idols, we’re sacrificing much. We sacrifice a closer relationship with Christ. The more things cloud our vision, the less we see of Him. We sacrifice blessings and lessons that the Lord may have planned. While we’re seeking a way out, we might be missing the growth God wants to instill in us. This is evident in the modern church. Just as Aaron appeased the grumbling people by making them an idol they could appreciate, we have pastors who do the same to keep “peaceful” and prosperous churches. They sacrifice their testimony for the sake of appreciation and appeasement. Instant gratification wins over concern about ramifications. They sacrifice the spreading of the Gospel, and they dishonor the Lord by erecting a golden calf in the sanctuary. Where the raw truth of eternal damnation without the blood of Christ is supposed to be shared, they replace it with cushy services of self-help messages, feel-good prayers, and music. Is this honoring God or satan? As Lucifer declared, “I will make myself like the Most High,” so have many churches made the Most High in their own image—the image of sinful man.

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people.’”

(Exodus 32:9)

How often are we obstinate? Whenever we are challenged to examine ourselves, there is serious bias that gets in the way—our own obstinate bias. It’s an uncomfortable process for us when God weeds out the tares in our life, but we need to earnestly seek His face and ask Him to do the weeding. We could very well be nursing the idol of pride if we don’t think idolatry is a big enough deal to take seriously. It is a very serious thing, for by giving our thoughts to God, *“we are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ”* (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Let us not lose sight of Him and create a calf for ourselves, for we will surely stumble over it in the dark!

“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him.”

(Hebrews 11:6)