



Geography of Salvation

Preaching the Map

A Bible Study with Stan Key

MOUNT SINAI (PART III)—A LOT OF BULL

Exodus 32

- I. Trouble in the camp! (Read Ex 32:1–10, 15–30)
- A. Just six weeks after the wedding ceremony, the bride is in bed with another lover, committing **adultery**—with **a bull**. Ever since Sinai, it seems there has always been a lot of bull in the church!¹
 - B. We will never get out of the desert and into Canaan until we learn how to deal with **sin in the redeemed**. After experiencing the blood of the Passover Lamb, the waters of baptism (Red Sea), and the vows of the covenant, is there no cure for sin? Is this story of the golden calf a picture of the **normal** Christian life?
 - C. Moses breaks the tablets (Ex 32:19). This is not a temper tantrum but a symbolic action. Adultery is a “great sin” (Ex 32:10, 21, 30–31) and potentially **grounds for divorce**. God is on the verge of blotting out names from his book (Ex 32:33).
 - D. What happened? The people somehow developed a false view of God and salvation. This meant they were putting their trust in a **false gospel**. And their spiritual leader (Aaron) went along with them. This is **pastoral malpractice** of the worst kind. The people were out of Egypt, but Egypt was not out of the people!
- II. Three characteristics of a false gospel.
- A. The clergy **follow the people** rather than lead them.
 - 1. The people want **contemporary worship**. Egypt worships a bull (Apis) and so do the Canaanites (Baal). They want worship that is seeker sensitive, market driven, and culturally relevant.
 - 2. Aaron thinks his job is to reflect public opinion rather than to **shape** it, to give the people what they want rather than what they need. He is a thermometer when God called him to be a thermostat.
 - 3. As Adam blamed Eve, so Aaron passes the buck and blames the people for what happened (Ex 32:22–24). What a wimp. He refuses to take responsibility. But God holds him **fully** responsible for what happened (Ex 32:21,25).
 - 4. Pastors must stop trying to **entertain the goats** and get back to the job of feeding the sheep.
 - B. We make god **in our image** rather than allowing God to make us in His.
 - 1. The sin in Exodus 32 is not a violation of the first commandment (“You shall have no other gods besides me”) but the second: “You shall not make for yourself **a carved image**” (Ex 20:4–6).
 - 2. Aaron and the people are not worshipping another god. They are worshipping the God who brought them out of Egypt (Ex 20:4) named Yahweh (Ex 20:6). They just want to worship him like they worship in Egypt and Canaan. The

¹ The English dictionary includes the following secondary definitions for the word “bull”: nonsense, absurdity, insanity, stupidity, baloney, hypocrisy, hogwash, balderdash, flap doodle... plus some words my mother taught me never to use!

word to describe this is **syncretism**, a mixture of true religion with false religion. Note how the same error occurred with Jeroboam (I Kgs 12:28).

3. “If your **concept** of God is wrong, then the more religious you become, the more dangerous you become to yourself and to others” (William Temple).
 4. There is a huge difference between worshipping God **as he is** and worshipping your concept of God: God as you think he should be. If we ever hope to get out of the desert and into the Land of Promise, we must have a right concept of God and worship him **in the right way**. Note how this false worship (Ex 32–34) is inserted in the broader context of proper worship (Ex 25–31, 35–40).
 5. In the New Testament we learn of another dramatic example of inappropriate worship that also ended tragically: Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11).
- C. The purpose of redemption is to make us **happy** rather than holy.
1. “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up **to play**” (Ex 32:6). The word “play” suggests sex-play (Gen 26:8) and indicates a drunken orgy.
 2. Bad theology always leads to **immorality**. “Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint” (Prv 29:18).
 3. We **resemble** what we worship (Ps 115:4–8). If you worship a bull, you will soon act like one! But if you worship the Holy One, you will in fact become holy. The gospel’s purpose is not to make us healthy, wealthy, and happy but to make us **holy**. “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (I Pt 1:15).
 4. Jesus came to save us **from** our sins, not leave us in them (Matt 1:21). He wants to do more than take us out of Egypt. He wants to deliver us from our **Egyptian nature!**

III. How should godly leadership deal with a false gospel?

- A. **Intercession** must be made (Ex 32:7–14). Someone must stand in the gap between a holy God and a sinful people. While Aaron is down in the valley leading the people into sin, Moses is up on the mountain interceding with God.
1. The *nature* of intercession: **a wrestling match**. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down, for *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt have corrupted themselves...’ But Moses said to the Lord, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt...?’” (Ex 32:7, 11).
 2. The *power* of intercession: causing God to **change his mind/repent**. “Turn from your burning anger and repent... and the Lord repented” (Ex 32:12, 14). But see Numbers 23:19. Warning: don’t pray like this unless you are a close **friend** of God (Ex 33:11)! Other occasions when God repents:
 - Genesis 6:6. God repents that he made mankind and decides to send a **flood** to destroy them all.
 - I Samuel 15:11, 29, 35. God repents that he made **Saul** king.
 - Jonah 3:10. When the people of **Nineveh** repent of their evil ways, God repents and decides not to destroy the city.
 3. The *content* of intercession:
 - Your **glory** is at stake in this. What will the Egyptians say? (Ex 32:12)
 - Your **promises**: Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... (Ex 32:13)

4. The *cost* of intercession: “If you will not forgive their sin, please **blot me out** of your book that you have written” (Ex 32:32). See also Romans 9:2–3.
 5. The *rarity* of intercession: God is looking for **just one** who will stand in the gap. “I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none” (Ezek 22:30).
- B. The idol must be **destroyed** (Ex 32:20). There can be no compromise permitted when the integrity of the gospel is at stake.
- C. **Atonement** must be made (Ex 32:30). The sin must be named and confessed and forgiveness must be established so that reconciliation occurs.
- D. A **decision** must be called for (Ex 32:26). *Who is on the Lord’s side?*
- IV. Three powerful truths
- A. Sin remains but it must not **reign**.

The story of the golden calf reminds us that sin remains in the camp (and in our hearts) even **after** redemption. Though we are freed from the guilt and power of sin, we continue to wrestle with the reality of a sinful nature; what the New Testament calls **the flesh**. “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love” (*Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* by Robert Robinson). Though the sin nature remains, we have been given spiritual resources to live in **victory**.

- B. There are **two kinds** of sin.

When God calls the people “stiff-necked”² (Ex 32:9), he is referring to something much more serious than a mistake, use of poor judgment, or a momentary fall. Numbers 15:27–31 gives a very helpful description of two very different kinds of sin:

*If one person sins **unintentionally**, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes **a mistake**, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven... But the person who does anything with a **high hand** [a raised fist; defiantly, willfully, deliberately] whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him.*

The sin with the golden calf was a high-handed sin! It was willful, premeditated, brazen, and continual. It was of a nature that created the potential for divorce, for **falling from grace**. The New Testament also recognizes a level of sin in the believer that has the potential to sever one’s relationship with God.

*For if we go on sinning **deliberately** after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26–27)*

² The metaphor of a “stiff neck” refers to an ox or a horse that will not respond to a rope when tugged. When applied to people, it refers to an attitude of stubbornness that refuses to respond to correction.

C. The meaning of **ordination**.

Moses and Aaron were Levites. Moses responded to “bull in church” in the right way. But Aaron was a major part of the problem and became Exhibit A for pastoral malpractice! When the tribe of Levi stepped forward and killed those who were guilty, even members of their own family, they were ordained for ministry (Ex 32:25–29). Though this passage does not give an exhaustive definition of the meaning of ordination, it does underscore that those ordained to ministry must:

1. Be able to **discern** right from wrong.

Aaron completely failed in this and led the people into a false understanding of God and salvation. Those ordained to ministry must be spiritually mature so that they can “distinguish **good** from **evil**” (Heb 5:12–14). Later Moses would give a sort of elementary job description to Aaron for his duties as high priest: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to **teach** the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them...” (Lev 10:10–11).

2. Be ready to implement spiritual **discipline**.

When the congregation goes astray, the leader must be ready and willing to bring correction and apply discipline, even when applied to **friends** and **family**. This helps to explain why Jesus insisted that “If anyone comes to me and does not hate³ his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciples” (Lk 14:26; see also Matt 12:46–50; Lk 12:51–53). The problem Paul faced in the church at Corinth was not that there was **sin in the church** (a man living with his step mother), but rather that the leaders were not doing anything about it (I Cor 5)!

3. Know how to **intercede**, to stand in the gap.

Ultimately, the only right response to sin in the church is intercession, standing in the gap. This is what Moses did. Such a ministry is very **costly**.

TABLE TALK

1. How do you respond to the story of the golden calf? Does it fit your understanding of the journey of salvation or does it seem out of place?
2. Have you ever been in a church where there was clergy malpractice? Describe what it was like.
3. When does the desire to be “culturally relevant” and “seeker sensitive” cross the line and become syncretism?
4. How has this lesson impacted your understanding of intercessory prayer?
5. Does God change his mind (repent)? If so, does this thought bring you comfort or does it disturb you? Explain.
6. After salvation “sin remains but it does not reign.” Discuss what this means. Make it personal.
7. Why is it important to distinguish “unintentional sins” from “high-handed sins”?

³ Jesus is certainly not encouraging literal hatred for family members. He is helping us to see that our love for him should be so great and all-encompassing that all other loves (even the highest and healthiest) seem like “hatred” in comparison.

Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

By Walter C. Smith (1867)

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.*

*Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might:
thy justice, like mountains high soaring above,
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.*

*To all, life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree,
then wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.*

*Thou reignest in glory, thou dwellest in light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all praise we would render; O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee!*