

Prayer

Almighty God and Lord of all history, we call on You to make Yourself known through what is happening in the world around us. Give us eyes to see Your love, Your justice, Your mercy and Your guidance all around us. Give us the wisdom to explain it to a world in need of understanding and direction; in the name of our Saviour Jesus, we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: 'New beginnings'

The psalmist (Ps. 33:3, 96:1, 98:1) asks us to sing a 'new song' to the Lord. Ask the Lord to give you a new and refreshing spirit of praise, to encourage and bless your soul.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for all who live in polluted cities where a short life is expected*
 - *Praise God for His mercy in keeping you safe as you travel*
 - *Continue to pray about the tensions over Iran and its elections*
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Meditation

Lord, when there is nothing left and I feel poured out like water;
I come to You to renew my soul.

Lord, when my bones ache with weariness, stress and toil;
I come to You to heal my body.

Lord, when I have lost my way and fail to find my direction;
I come to You for clear guidance.

Lord, when the repetitive nature of my earthly life oppresses me;
I come to you for full restoration.

Lord, when I am troubled by the things I see around me every day;
I come to You for the peace of Your love.

Lord, when the people around me fail to see me for who I am;
I come to You to affirm my soul.

Lord, when the world has lost its way and I do not know where to go;
I come to You to find direction.

Because You never let me down!

Bible Study - Exodus 32:1-6

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Get up, and make gods for us who we can parade in front of us. As for this Moses, the man who led us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him!' ² Aaron said to them, 'Remove the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' ³ So all the people removed the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron; ⁴ he took this from them and cast an image of a calf, fashioning this with an engraving tool. They said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of it. Then he made a proclamation, 'Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!' ⁶ They 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 indulge in festivity.

Review

This is a most extraordinary passage of Scripture! While Moses was at the top of Mount Sinai receiving the vision of the Tabernacle, this powerful picture of God with His people, real events at the foot of the mountain shattered the prospect of its completion. While we studied the detailed instructions for the making of the Tabernacle, we began to see a picture of what God wanted, which was a relationship with His people in which Israel honoured Him as their God, and He gave them rights of access to His mercy and grace. Unfortunately, the reality was that the people of Israel were not yet ready for this.

In Moses' absence, the people felt abandoned; at this time in history, all people needed to have a 'god' to worship. We do not understand this perceived need today, but it was their reality. The first verse of our passage says 'when the people saw that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain'. However, this does not indicate impatience alone. In a subtle way that is impossible to translate, the Hebrew indicates that the people felt ashamed at being abandoned in their time of need. From their point of view, their access to God was through Moses, and without Moses, God was not there!

It is more than ironic that the preparations for the priesthood described in Exodus 25-31 anticipated a time when Aaron would take over Moses' priestly role. But in this passage, Aaron acted by himself to suppress the people's revolt by making an idol! Moreover, it seems that Aaron believed that the image he made was suitable for worshipping the Lord (see verse 5)! We can only wonder at his reasons; did he believe that the commandments of God (Ex 20:1f.) which included a ban on idols, were somehow negotiable if life became difficult? There are plenty of examples of such changing attitudes today, but it is remarkable to read this in Scripture, and extraordinary that Israel's own holy writings should contain a description of their own terrible rebellion against the God who had saved them.

The details of what the people did are startling given everything God had done for them; they gave all their gold jewellery to make a golden calf! Remember, God wanted this gold for the manufacture of the holiest of objects in the Tabernacle tent (25:3f.). Some have wondered how sufficient gold could be assembled for a large project such as this; but it was no less than what would have been required for making everything in the Tabernacle. The truth is that many ancient people, like those in parts of Africa and India today, wore a large amount of gold in pendants and jewellery, both men and women (e.g. see 32:2). If we add to this the fact that the Israelites 'plundered' the Egyptians of their wealth () before they left, it is clear that the material required was not the problem!

Aaron oversaw the construction of the golden calf, and presented it to the people (32:4). He declared that the calf was the representation of the Lord who had brought the people of Israel out of Egypt! Aaron's turnaround was complete. What he did seems ridiculous to us now, but Aaron probably knew, deep down, that he would have to defend his actions to Moses when he returned, and he may have thought he could do it on the grounds of expediency. To keep everyone happy, he even declared a festive day (32:5), contravening the Lord's express wish that His people appear before Him in celebratory worship only three times a year (23:14f.). The people were eager for this festivity after the hardships of the desert and the awesomeness of what they had experienced at the foot of Sinai (see Exodus 19). They were ready to party!

We can pour scorn too quickly on this story because it sounds so fantastic, rather like a fairy tale. The trouble is that many of our apparently expedient actions might turn out to look similarly ridiculous in the light of God's future, so we do better to understand the story than dismiss it.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

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Notes on the text and translation

- V1** *'Who we can parade in front of us'* The Hebrew says 'who will go before us'. I have no clear evidence, but I reckon that it is worth considering that this slightly non-sensible sentence might refer to the parading of gods before a people; something done in many cultures.
- V4** *'He took this from them and cast an image of a calf, fashioning this with an engraving tool'* The Hebrew here is odd, and scholars are unsure of a number of words, which appear to be technical references to tools used either for engraving or for molding. The description appears to indicate that the calf was created from a mould and then inscribed with decoration.
- V6** *'the people ... rose up to indulge in festivity'* The last word in this text seems to refer to revelry of a kind that might take place at pagan festivities. There is good reason to suspect that the word was used for sexual excess as well as other festive activity.

Going Deeper

Application

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do people make 'golden calves' today that stand in place of God when crises come and the Lord or His servants seem to delay?
2. Aaron told the people to believe that the golden calf had saved them. What does society tell us to believe in today, and why?
3. The call to festivity (32:6) is always welcomed, but how and why does festivity end up in revelry and excess?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The whole of the book of Exodus depends on dramatic contrasts; Moses' upbringing in the court of the Pharaohs in contrast to his lowly beginnings, and the contrast between the poor and servile Israelites and the army of Pharaoh who were defeated by the Lord in the Red Sea. The Lord God does works of grace today to give His people victory against the most extreme odds, and they continue to prevail! If we keep our eyes on these things, then we will be less likely to fall because of misguided expectations, as Israel did.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *The people of Israel gave the gold they should have saved for God to the making of a golden calf. Are there any 'golden calves' we support, whether directly or indirectly, with our resources? Think and pray about this carefully, so that God's people are not fooled by what appears to be godly, but is not.*
- *Pray for the church of God, that it will keep itself pure throughout the trials and the disruptions of life today. There are many difficult things happening in the world today, but God's Word stands forever. Pray that His people will stand by Him.*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Friend; give us peace in the midst of strife, joy in the midst of unhappiness, and grace in the midst of trouble. In this way, may we know your love and affection, and may we never take it for granted. AMEN
