

# ***Shaping A Nation: Distracted By An Idol***

**Exodus 32:1-24**

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They were both young, and totally in love. During courtship Sherri and Jake shared their hearts and spun dreams of a future together. Before their families and a representative of the Lord they exchanged their vows. After a honeymoon in Jamaica they moved into their suburban town home.

It seemed like only a few short months later that my phone rang. Jake was on the other end - devastated. She'd left, claiming it was all a big mistake. No surprise to discover that the "mistake" was reflected through the face of another man, some guy she'd met at the gym.

He was bewildered, sad, angry - cycling from one emotion to the other, totally unable to understand how it could happen. Sherri, on the other hand, had all sorts of answers and explanations for the adultery... including how, in her case, there was absolutely NO way the affair should be labelled such.

Either way, the end result was a covenant relationship shattered, pieces scattered on the ground.

I think of Sherri and Jake when I read the account of Exodus 32. Hard to imagine that something so good – the beginning of a new nation after centuries in slavery, on their way to a bright future in a new land -  
- hard to believe that they could get involved with another god so quickly after the Exodus. The Lord had made covenant with them. He had wooed them through Moses. He had granted them freedom. He had walked them through the water of the Red Sea – their national baptism. And He had miraculously destroyed their enemies. Israel, under the leadership of Miriam and the women, had danced and sung, celebrated their freedom and their new national identity in the Lord. Now there could be dreams and plans for their children. It was a wonderful beginning.

And then, oh so soon after that – this awful garbage of Exodus 32.

Spiritual adultery of the most overt sort.

Like a young bride whose whim and fancy changes as quick as the weather. I mean, we're only talking weeks after the exodus. And it is not as if God has been silent since the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. He has provided clean drinking water, twice. He had miraculously helped this young nation defeat the powerful desert army of Amalek. He has sent manna to feed them near Elim. He has guided them with a pillar of fire and cloud, and settled that fiery cloud now on the top of Mt.Sinai.

And still they went off into spiritual adultery.

Hard to believe, but friends - there it is.

Exodus 32 is a living illustration of how relationships can be destroyed and how people, even people of faith, can wander so far off the trail and into the tangled briars of sin so very, very quickly.

I'd like to suggest three elements at work in that sordid party going on at the base of Mt.Sinai. And then I'd like to invite you to consider with me how we can be on guard against those elements rearing their ugly head in our lives and sowing the same sort of moral and spiritual rot that they brought to Israel.

Three elements of corruption show up in Israel.

The first is the sinful element of ingratitude.

The second is the sinful element of wanting everything their own way.

The third sinful element is how amazingly good they were at trying to justify what was going on.

To make it easier to remember I think of these three points as:

- **self-absorbed**
- **self-centred**
- **self-righteous**

### **SELF-ABSORBED**

Self-absorbed - so caught up in their own immediate feelings and passions and desires that they couldn't see the bigger picture. They couldn't see how well they had been cared for. They couldn't see how much the Lord had done for them. There wasn't an ounce of gratitude in them. Not for the plagues in Egypt that set them free. Not for the miracle crossing at the Red Sea that destroyed their enemies. Not for the supplies of fresh water. Not for the daily manna. Not for the visible Presence of God on the top of the mountain. No gratitude. No vision for God's presence and His great, gracious gifts to them.

The people are too restless.

They want more.

And they want it **NOW!**

They are self-absorbed.

Which so quickly leads to the second point.

**SELF-CENTRED**

Self-centred - what these self-absorbed people want, they want **NOW**, and they'll get it on their own terms. They were crooning "I'll do it my way" long before Sinatra or Elvis ever sang it. They wanted a god they could pick up and move, one they could touch, one they could see, and one in a form that was familiar to them. They wanted that because it was what everyone around them had. And they didn't want to be any different from the rest.

Understand that they had all grown up in a culture where fertility idols were common place. Bulls were one of the most common idol forms around - symbols of prosperity and growth. The Egyptian deity, Amon-Re, was depicted as a bull. And Psalm 106:20 tells us that this is exactly what the golden calf looked like - a bull.

Make this for us, Aaron.

NOW!

In verse 9 the Lord tells Moses that these people are "*stiff-necked*." That was a farming picture referring to an animal - perhaps a bull - out in the field and hitched to a plow. The farmer would use some kind of bridle around the neck to control the movement of the animal. Occasionally, though, you'd run up against a stubborn one. Wouldn't matter **how** hard you'd tug to the left, it was as if that animal's neck was made of stone. It wasn't going to bend and the critter wasn't going to turn where the farmer wanted. Had a mind of it's own.

Stiff-necked.

Israel - their own way, self-absorbed and self-centred.

And amazingly adept at being self-righteous, too.

Which is the third point.

**SELF-RIGHTEOUS**

You've got to love Aaron's rendition of the event. Perhaps he'd been smoking some extra strong British Columbia weed at the v.6 post-worship party time. Hard to understand what colour his reality was painted!

"It wasn't my fault. Moses - you know how these people are. It was just a political necessity. Besides, it's all so natural. I just threw in the gold, and out popped this statue."

**Self-absorbed.**

**Self-centred.**

**Self-righteous.**

The only thing standing between them and their well-deserved destruction for the sin of spiritual adultery was a mediator-advocate, Moses. He comes to their undeserved defence before God.

They're caught up in enjoying the spoils of their plundered wealth from Egypt with the huge party, but Moses throws himself between them and God as a priestly-intercessor.

He then comes down from the mountain and serves two other roles - prophet, in telling them what God's true will is. And kingly ruler in commanding a response to the sin and ordering the people back into rightful living.

He rescues them from their self-absorption, self-centredness and self-righteousness.

Well, that was then. But I promised you that we'd reflect on ways to prevent these three elements from sneaking in and causing sinful destruction in our lives.

Which they so easily can.

On World Hunger Sunday think for a moment about our lives.

Here we sit surrounded by luxury; luxury that has come into our lap from around the world.

How could the dangerous three-some of self-absorption, self-centredness and self-righteousness weasle their way in?

Well, the self-absorption of ingratitude - a consumer culture fosters precisely such an attitude. Not pausing to ask, "When is enough?" Not thinking too terribly often about whether we can do without. Seeing

our blessings, somehow, as our rights. And sometimes even forgetting to thank Him from whom all blessings ultimately flow.

Ingatitude and self-absorption keep looking for more.

And ingratitude quickly leads to self-centred living.

Living which might suggest that our own economic benefits are all that ultimately matters. It is living with a closed fist - hanging on tightly to what we have. It is keeping control for ourselves. It doesn't look up or look around or look beyond its own backyard.

Spiritually, self-centredness is living that won't take direction from anyone else - here on earth or in heaven.

And how easy it is to justify - to be so sure we are right.

Self-righteous.

On a personal level we can justify theft at work, because the company doesn't pay enough. We can justify the affair, because the wife is so cold. We can justify cheating on the exam, because everyone else does.

We can justify national activity, too. Security. Economic interests. Progress. You've heard the lines.

Tell me, though.

What does the Lord think?

He who is in the business of setting people free -

setting the Hebrews free from bondage in Egypt

setting sinners free from bondage to death and the devil

and, as Psalm 146 says, upholding the cause of the oppressed and giving food to the hungry -

What does He think when we get caught into that kind of thinking?

We gather here week after week to worship Him who is greater than Moses, for whom Moses is an prototype.

We worship Jesus, the great Mediator-Intercessor between God and us.

We worship Jesus, the great Prophet, God's Word become flesh.

We worship Jesus, the *"Beautiful Saviour, King of Creation."*

He is constantly serving as our lobbyist in Heaven.

Constantly granting His protecting, guiding power.

Romans 8 says that:

34 ...It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Is that freedom, or what?

We are given the gracious, undeserved privilege of living in that freedom!

Amazing grace!

And so, while Jesus advocates for us in heaven, up on the mountain, hidden by the clouds, so to speak -  
- how are we, in the meantime, behaving here?

Would the image of revelry be appropriate as a label to slap on the Canadian lifestyle relative to the rest of the world?

Could we in any way be considered a nation that dances around some sort of golden calf, some sort of image that celebrates fertility and prosperity and progress? Dancing, while ignoring the Lord who brought us to where we are?

Self-absorbed?

Self-centred?

Self-righteous?

I wonder.

And,

I wonder how different Christians are in their living from non-Christians when it comes to issues of wealth and prosperity and progress?

How different are we than non-Christians in our nation?

If we truly believe that all we have is a gift from the Lord -

If we truly believe that our lives are surrendered to Jesus the Saviour -

If we truly believe that our actions are a response to His great action of Salvation and Eternal Life

If we truly believe that -

how does it show?

I wonder that on World Hunger Sunday.

They tell me that there are a few topics guaranteed to get preachers into trouble. The all-knowing "they" tell me that finances is one of those topics.

So - here comes trouble. Can't really avoid it.

Because, you see, a bible passage about dancing around a golden calf image, the idol of fertility and prosperity, begs a question or two about wealth management.

So, how be I just ask this question of myself.

You can listen in if you want.

Mr. Gehrels - does your wealth control you, or do you control your wealth?

Mr. Gehrels - do you really believe that everything you have is God's gift?

Mr. Gehrels - do you acknowledge him by the way you use what you have?

One of the ways that the Lord has given us to test the answer to that question is via a tithe. He asks me to give Him the first cut out of my paycheck. Donate it to some corner of charity work that is overtly done on this globe in His name.

Part of that to this church. And part of it to agencies that do education work and relief work and development work - the sort of thing that Peter Berti mentioned and that our pre-service slide show spoke about.

So - begin with giving at church.

Mr. Gehrels - As a person who took membership vows here at Calvin Church you were given a giving guide - a little chart that calls you to give according to income level on a sliding scale. Do you follow it?

Can you give willingly, joyfully, fully?

Not just to ministry here at Calvin, but also elsewhere in God's kingdom?

Or does the golden calf of luxury have a grip on you, Ken?

Are you dancing around the idol and coming up with all kinds of good reasons as to why doing that is OK for you to do? Why you should grip tightly to your wealth as if you owned it, and have the right to spend it all on yourself without looking around, or spreading it around?

I've got to answer that question.

And maybe, friends, as you stare in the face of the hungry -

faces through whom Jesus stares back at us -

you may want to consider it, too.

For there isn't a single one of us here who wants to be trapped in Exodus 32 along with those Israelites.

I know that for a fact.

You're not that kind of people.

But the temptation is there.

And the Evil One is sneaky.

And those three nasties -

self-absorption

self-centredness  
self-righteousness  
have this infernal way of creeping in.

My desire is to serve Jesus fully and freely.  
I don't want to stare no idol in the face.  
I don't want to dance around no calf.

This morning I hear the Lord speak to me out of Exodus 32.  
Perhaps he is speaking to you, too.

Hear the words of Jesus in a prophetic parable about the end times.  
Matthew 25:

*34 ...Then the King will say to those on the right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*

*35 For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.*

*36 I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'*

*37 "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink?*

*38 Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing?*

*39 When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?'*

*40 And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, I you were doing it to me!'*