

Exodus 32:7-14

⁷The LORD spoke to Moses: “Hurry down, because your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves! ⁸They have quickly turned from the way which I commanded them. They have made a calf for themselves out of metal and have worshipped it. They have sacrificed to it and said, “This is your god, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen these people, and they certainly are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰So now leave me alone, so that my anger can burn hot against them, so that I may consume them and make you into a great nation.”

¹¹Moses begged the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your anger burn against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, ‘He brought them out for an evil purpose, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn back from your fierce anger and change your mind about inflicting disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self. You said to them, ‘I will multiply your seed like the stars of the sky, and I will give all this land that I have spoken about to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

¹⁴Then the LORD changed his mind about the disaster which he said he would inflict on his people.

The Sin of Idolatry

I.

The interview process to fill the vacant position was unusual, to say the least. The so-called applicant wasn’t looking for a new job—he was happy with what he was currently doing. In fact, he hadn’t even put in an application.

At first he didn’t even realize he was being interviewed for a job. Since he never applied and wasn’t interested in a new kind of position, he tried to refuse the position, but the One hiring him was pretty insistent. Five times he tried to refuse. Who am I to do this job? Who are *you*? What if people don’t believe me? I don’t speak very well. Please—just get somebody else to do it! He never even bothered to pull out his trump card with a sixth reason he shouldn’t be hired—I’m too old.

After doing everything he could to blow the interview, he was forced into the position, anyway. Some people are born to be leaders. Others are just thrust into the position and learn to deal with it. I suppose it is unclear *which* applied to this particular leader.

You’ve probably guessed—the person who never wanted his job was Moses. The position was leader of the nation of Israel. Again and again he tried to refuse the position. He was 80 years old when God called him to his position as leader.

I wonder if Moses thought about all those circumstances as he contemplated what to say to God while he was up on Mt. Sinai receiving the Law from the hand of God himself. I tried to tell you I didn’t want this job. You *made* me take it!

Bling. The whole issue at hand seemed to be about the bling. Who would *possibly* think about worshiping the bling? Just days before all the bling had been around their necks and in their ears; they had worn it as rings on their fingers, and bracelets on wrists and ankles.

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worshipped it. They have sacrificed to it and said, “This is your god, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt”” (Exodus 32:7-8, EHV). The bling that had been worn as jewelry around their necks and on their wrists and in their ears had been collected and melted down and recast. The people were bowing down to a lump of jewelry turned into a calf.

II.

You would never do such a thing, would you? You would never take all your bling and have it melted down and recast into the shape of a calf so that you could worship it.

But not because you don’t have the same problem the Children of Israel had at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

The way it’s done now is to parade the bling. You drive the bling. You live in the bling. Bling has become the way you keep score with your friends and neighbors. Our society has become one that prizes stuff. It’s all about getting as much as you can and displaying it for others. Without thinking about it, people have come to worship the bling. Having as much as possible has been what life is all about for decades now.

The reality is, bling is about showing how great and powerful you are. Our worship of stuff isn’t so much about the stuff, but about ourselves. I am such a wonderful and magnificent person. See? You can tell by the quantity and quality of the things I have.

We would *never* melt down the bling. It’s too nice to look at and use and enjoy...and worship...just as it is.

One of the more admirable qualities of the millennial generation is that they are less absorbed with material things. The exception is their technology—their phones and tablets and computers. Millennials are more about experiences. Perhaps it is becoming less about worshipping bling, and has changed into worshipping life experiences. Attending sporting events, or joining sports leagues. A brag-fest about how many exotic vacations you have been able to take. What wonderful places are on *your* bucket list? What great experiences can you boast about?

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen these people, and they certainly are a stiff-necked people’” (Exodus 32:9, EHV).

The Children of Israel certainly were a stiff-necked people, weren’t they? They had all the advantages of seeing the great and powerful One True and Only God take care of them and bring them out of Egypt. Yet how quickly they turned their backs on his goodness!

We 21st Century Christians are certainly a stiff-necked people, aren’t we? We have all the advantages of seeing everything about God’s *completed* plan for saving us, yet we all too often focus on our stuff or on ourselves, rather than worshipping the One True and Only God who has saved us.

III.

“So now leave me alone, so that my anger can burn hot against them, so that I may consume them and make you into a great nation” (Exodus 32:10, EHV). Poor Moses was the reluctant leader of this rag-tag bunch of misfits that had decided to worship the bling.

I think it was pretty natural that the *real* God who had actually purchased their freedom from Egypt would be more than a little bit upset with the people, don’t you? They had exchanged the *real* God for a hunk of metal. God told Moses to step aside so that he could obliterate the Children of Israel.

Nothing has changed. The real God is still angry over sin. He does not tolerate it. The Psalmist David writes: “For you are not a God who takes pleasure in evil. With you the wicked cannot dwell. ⁵ The arrogant cannot stand before your eyes. You hate all evildoers”

(Psalm 5:4-5, EHV). Not only does God hate sin, he hates the evildoer. *All* evildoers. Things don't sound too good for me. I, too, have been enamored with stuff. I, too, look at myself in a more favorable light than I should. Every one of us puts ourselves and our own desires above God from time to time. God does not take pleasure in such evil.

“So now leave me alone, so that my anger can burn hot against them, so that I may consume them and make you into a great nation” (Exodus 32:10, EHV). Did you happen to catch God's words of grace, even in the midst of his anger over what Israel had done? God did not need Moses to get out of his way in order to destroy the people. He controls the situation in order to give Moses a chance to step in between the people and God.

It's quite a scenario, isn't it? Moses had been a reluctant leader. He had tried again and again to refuse the position, but God thrust it on him, anyway. *Now* he is put in the position of being the one who has to step between the One True God who had hired him to lead the people, and the people who had defied the very One Moses had not been able to refuse.

“Moses begged the LORD his God and said, ‘O LORD, why does your anger burn against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?’” (Exodus 32:11, EHV).

It wasn't Moses who got between *you* and God to plead for you in the midst of your ill-conceived idea to worship the bling—or worship yourself. It was Jesus.

Jesus took on himself the role of evildoer, so that God could direct all his hatred of the evildoer on Jesus, rather than on you. Jesus suffered hell for you. The very Son of God not only got between you and the righteous anger of the Mighty God over your sins of idolatry, he paid for them. He laid everything on the line. He gave up his very life as the sacrifice necessary to appease God over your worship of bling.

IV.

“Then the LORD changed his mind about the disaster which he said he would inflict on his people” (Exodus 32:14, EHV). Is God wishy-washy? How is it possible that the Mighty God, who does not change like the shifting shadows, can be said to change his mind?

The word for “changed his mind” in the Hebrew is the same one used in this passage in Isaiah: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her. Her warfare really is over. Her guilt is fully paid for. Yes, she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1-2, EHV).

God changed his mind. God comforted. Same word.

“Then the LORD changed his mind about the disaster which he said he would inflict on his people” (Exodus 32:14, EHV). In his grace, God chose not to impose the penalties Israel deserved for her disobedience as the people gathered around the lump of recast metal. God is great. God is good.

It is not fear of an angry God that motivates you to love and serve him. It is awe and wonder over the great love and mercy he has continually shown to you.

You and I have not deserved his love and favor as we turn our heads aside from him and toward the bling in our lives. Yet *still* he showers his grace and his love on us. *Still* he continually calls us back to his side. *Still* he promises to be with us; to never leave us or forsake us. Even while we were still sinners, he chose us and made us his own. While we were still sinners, he sent his Son to be the Mediator even greater than Moses who would stand firmly and endure his eternal fury over our sins without flinching.

God grant that we live lives of thankfulness for his goodness and mercy. Don't set your heart on things that decay, but on the Lord your God. Look to him, and to him alone, for your salvation. Amen.