

Study 0052

Scripture Text: Exodus 32:1-35

Thus far, we have seen that the premise or sphere, within which the true worship of God could take place in the Old Covenant Era, was on the basis of a covenant relationship, which established mutual obligations between God and His people. Within the environment of the covenant, were the governing principles (the Law) for worship and relational matters, which governed or regulated everything from individual lives of the people to the priesthood, sacrifices, and holy convocations (feasts and festivals). Finally, we have also seen that all aspects of worship under the Old Covenant Era, were tied to a location: the place where God placed His name, also known as the sanctuary, or place of worship.

Old Covenant Era Worship: Early Cracks

The very first challenge to the worship of God occurred shortly after the covenant was cut between God and the children of Israel. Moses had left the camp under the custody of Aaron and Hur, and gone up the mountain to meet with God (**Exodus 24:9-18**), where he was to receive instructions for the building of the sanctuary, as well as the Ten Commandments written with the Hand of God. While he was up on the mountain, certain of the children of Israel, desired Aaron to make for them a god, like the ones they saw in Egypt, that they would worship. This, Aaron did by telling them to bring their ornaments and trinkets, which they had received from the Egyptians because God brought them into favour with the Egyptians (**Exodus 12:35-36**), and he fashioned these items of jewellery into a gold calf. This gold calf, Aaron declared to the people to be 'God', and the people worshipped it in the immoral and reckless manner with which the Egyptians had worshipped their own gods. The people of Israel were even naked at some point in all the 'celebration' (**Exodus 32:25**), and revelries, and quickly forgot about God, Who had brought them out of the house of bondage. But for Moses' intercession, the children of Israel would have been completely destroyed by God. At one point, God even suggested that they go on to the Promised Land, but without Him (**Exodus 33:1-3**). Moses' further intercession and pleas with God reversed this, and eventually, God agreed to go with them and to guide them on the way (**Exodus 33:4-17**). It is a wonder to think that Aaron and the elders who had seen God and had a meal in His presence (**Exodus 24:9-12**) could quickly turn around and make a despicable calf to worship; be it gold or even diamond (contrary to God's first and second Commandments)!

Following God's forgiveness, the instruction to build the sanctuary was again renewed shortly after the gold calf incident (**Exodus 35:1ff**). All these took place within the first year of Israel's exodus from the bondage of Egypt. The tabernacle itself was reared up at the start of the second year in the wilderness (**Exodus 40:17**). Shortly afterwards, God was set to take His people into the Promised Land as He had promised; unfortunately, the people had their own idea on how they would go into the Promised Land, which backfired (**Deuteronomy 1:19-46**). It is very instructive to note that during all the times Moses said to Pharaoh, "*Let My people go*", that the underlying reason was, "*that they may serve Me*". This means that, God brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt so that they may, primarily, serve (worship) Him. The Promised Land was really a secondary matter. Unfortunately, the children of Israel focused more on the Promised Land than on the God Who brought them out of the house of bondage, so that they may serve and worship Him. The Ten Commandments which God gave to the children of Israel emphasized the worship of God, by devoting the first three commandments to the issue (**Exodus 20:2-7**)! The building of the sanctuary and all the ancillary aspects (the priesthood, sacrifices, feasts, and Law) further strengthened the pre-eminence of the worship of the One True God. Unfortunately, all these

were lost on the children of Israel, as their focus or concern was more on satisfying their own lusts and personal comfort, as well as their desire to enter into the Promised Land (**Numbers 16:12-14; Matthew 6:24-34**). The priority of the children of Israel on their own desires, rather than on God became an albatross around their necks (**Numbers 11:1ff**).

When we take into account the incident of the gold calf, and the problems that emanated in the Book of Numbers, it is no wonder that the children of Israel were in for a shocker of their lives. Their idolatry (that is, their love for anyone and anything else more than for God), had set the stage for the disastrous consequences which eventually led to the postponement of their entering into the Promised Land for another 38 years, until the last of those who were 20 years and above had died off (except for Joshua and Caleb). In making the gold calf, the people's excuse was that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain; in murmuring against God, their reason was that God delayed in taking them into the Promised Land; and in refusing to enter the Promised Land, they said that God wanted to destroy them, so He was sending them into a territory of giants. The excuses, refusals, murmurings, and rebellion of the children of Israel were responsible for the early cracks in the covenant God cut with them. The children of Israel seemed to think that all there was to the covenant with God was God's promises of provision, protection, and blessings; as such, any inconvenience they encountered was 'good cause' for complaint against God and His appointed leaders. They never really focused on their own part/obligation to obey God's ordinances. The lessons we can learn from the early cracks of the covenant under the Old Covenant Era, are:

1. Worship is exclusively reserved for God and God alone. Not even a hint of a 'gold calf' is allowed.
2. We cannot learn how to worship God from people who do not have an ongoing relationship with God (**Leviticus 18:1-5**).
3. Only God (and His true delegated authority) can tell (and teach) us how He is to be worshipped.
4. The worship of God is inherently tied to a covenant with Him; thus, every true worshipper of God must be in a covenant relationship with God.
5. Breaking the covenant (which is contravening the provisions of the God's covenant), is the same thing as idolatry, and hold disastrous consequences (**Numbers 14:34**).
6. A man who focuses on himself and his needs will never be able to truly worship God (**Matthew 6:33**).
7. The fulfilment of God's promises is intrinsically tied to the worship of God, which is what the covenant was really all about (**Deuteronomy 28:1ff**).
8. Without our unconditional love for God, we cannot truly worship Him.

EXERCISE

Please state true or false to the statements below:

1. Once a person is in a covenant relationship with God, nothing can go wrong.
2. Breaking God's covenant is a broken relationship with God, which is equivalent to broken worship of God.
3. It is possible to have seen God, and still be involved in idolatry.
4. Regardless of the overwhelming presence of God, idolatry is still possible.
5. The primary reason for the salvation of man is to enable him worship God.
6. When we focus on ourselves rather than on God, we enter into idolatry.
7. When we focus on God's gifts more than on God Himself, we enter into idolatry.
8. It is possible to be denied entry into the kingdom of heaven by breaking God's covenant.

9. There are similarities in the worship of God and of idols, so we can learn a lot from our fathers and others who worshipped idols.
10. If we don't love God, we would invariably break His covenant, and cannot truly worship God.
11. Human memory is short, and this is why God insists that we "*continue*" in the things He has asked us to do.
12. The covenant God made with the children of Israel emphasized the worship of God, and mentioned promises of provision, protection, and blessings, as a result of their sincere and truthful worship of Him.