

## **Lesson 8: The Law and the Golden Calf (Exodus 19-24)**

### **Sinai**

After three months of wandering through the desert, Israel arrives at Mount Sinai, the very place where Yahweh revealed His name to Moses from the burning bush. This was the fulfillment of the promise God made to Moses, “But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.”<sup>183</sup> God reveals Himself again to Moses, but this time with a law for all people. Israel sets up camp at the foot of the mountain and continues to receive their daily sustenance through manna. We see here that God is not simply taking the Israelites out of slavery but is building a new identity within them. Moses goes up the mountain and God says to him, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>184</sup>

This call to be “my own possession among all the peoples” is a preparation for the Church.<sup>185</sup> The eternal Father created the whole universe and chose to raise up people to share in his own divine life through His Son Jesus Christ. The Father determined to do this by means of the Church. “This ‘family of God’ is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history, in keeping with the Father’s plan.”<sup>186</sup> The gathering together of the family of God began at the moment when sin destroyed the communion of men with God, and that of men with themselves. “The gathering together of the Church is God’s reaction to the chaos provoked by sin.”<sup>187</sup> “The remote preparation for this gathering together of the family of God begins when God calls Abraham and promises that he will become the father of a great people. Its immediate preparation begins with Israel’s election as the People of God.”<sup>188</sup> This later event is when Israel was called out of Egypt to Mount Sinai to enter into covenant with God.<sup>189</sup> The Church, then, is God’s response to the division caused by sin, first with Adam and Eve and then with the Tower of Babel, and throughout Old Testament history as man sets himself up against God and neighbor.

God calls Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai to enter a covenant with him. It is through the covenant that God will reestablish unity among His people.<sup>190</sup> The Israelites gather at the foot of Mount Sinai in to receive the Law and here God establishes them as His holy

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<sup>183</sup> Exodus 3:12

<sup>184</sup> Exodus 19:4-6

<sup>185</sup> Exodus 19:5-6

<sup>186</sup> CCC, #759

<sup>187</sup> CCC, #761

<sup>188</sup> CCC, #762

<sup>189</sup> Exodus 19:5-6; see also Deuteronomy 7:6

<sup>190</sup> Unity is another key theme that runs throughout the Bible. Division comes from the devil (*diabolis* literally means “divider”) and God desires to restore unity through the Church. For a good reflection on this topic, read *Ut Unum Sint*, an encyclical letter by John Paul II.

people, the *Qahal* or church of God.<sup>191</sup> This is the historical beginning of the Church. Jews celebrate this event with the feast of *Shavu'ot* (Festival of Weeks), which is always celebrated seven weeks after Passover. In Greek *Shavu'ot* is rendered as "Pentecost." We see, then, how the Christian calendar reflects the calendar of events in the Old Testament. It is amazing that the immediate preparation of the Church begins with an Old Testament event, which will be transformed 1300 years later when the final manifestation of the Church occurs on what is now celebrated as Pentecost. This is a great example of how the Old Testament prepares the way for Christ and the Church, not only spiritually but through real, historical events.

One may raise the question: Does God love this group of people more than all the others since He has given them this privileged call the position to be His chosen people? We should remember that this unique dignity offered to Israel is not because of some intrinsic holiness that they possess, but because they are the "firstborn" among the nations.<sup>192</sup> The firstborn is blessed in service to the rest of the family. Israel is called to take on the role as a kingdom of priests as a service to the whole world. It is not a question of a self-centered dignity, but as a function by which God will bless all the nations. This is why God singles Israel out from the rest of the nations, so as to form them in His ways so that they may then serve the other nations as the eldest sibling. So we see that Israel is called *for* the other nations, not in spite of them. In this respect, this new identity will carry with it not so much great privileges as great responsibilities. Should Israel fail in its calling, the entire world will suffer. This can be related to our lives as Christians. We have been given a great grace, but while it does sanctify the individual soul, it also places a duty upon us to serve all people and witness to the faith. Unless we do this, we fail in our mission.

### **The Ten Commandments**

At the foot of the mountain the people pray and purify themselves for three days, and on the third day God descends on the mountain in the form of thick cloud.<sup>193</sup> The cloud that "overshadows" Mount Sinai is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. It will be the same Holy Spirit Who will come upon the Virgin Mary and "overshadow" her, so that she might conceive and give birth to Jesus.<sup>194</sup> Here, the cloud overshadows Sinai in order to reveal the Law to Israel, later the Holy Spirit will overshadow Mary to reveal and give Christ to the world. Just like the pillars of clouds and the fire, God uses physical means to make Himself present to Israel. This is also an anticipation of what we experience today in the sacraments. God uses the physical world to reveal His life to us.

Moses ascends the mountain and receives the divine law (Ten Commandments) by which God defines his holy people. God initiates the covenant relationship and it is up to Israel

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<sup>191</sup> Exodus 19. The word "church" (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, to "call out of") means an assembly of people who were called out by God to enter covenant with him. In Hebrew this word is "Qahal."

<sup>192</sup> Exodus 4:22

<sup>193</sup> Exodus 19:16 (This is a reminder that we should be careful how we approach God. Especially in the Mass, which is the true presence of God, we should not receive our Lord in communion unless we are properly disposed.)

<sup>194</sup> CCC, #697

to respond by obeying the divine law. If they live according to the Commandments then they are faithful to the covenant. It is important to understand the nature of the Ten Commandments. Very often they are seen as a limitation on our freedom. Pope Benedict XVI addressed this saying, “This was also the great temptation of the modern age, of the past three or four centuries. More and more people have thought and said, ‘But this God does not give us our freedom; with all his commandments, he restricts the space in our lives. So God has to disappear; we want to be autonomous and independent. Without this God we ourselves would be gods and do as we pleased.’”<sup>195</sup> The Ten Commandments, however, are not limitations on our freedom, but principles that preserve and in fact, give our freedom.<sup>196</sup> The Ten Commandments are a statement of truth or reality. Freedom is not the power to do anything we want (license) but the ability to act according to the truth of our nature (how God created us).<sup>197</sup> Freedom is ultimately found only in truth and the Ten Commandments are an expression of the truth that becomes guidelines by which our freedom is protected.<sup>198</sup> When we live by the Commandments we act more perfectly according to our nature, which is our path to freedom and happiness. The moral law, then, is not primarily a matter of obeying God, but it is to act in freedom according to our nature.<sup>199</sup> Acceptance of the Commandments is a sign that the individual has attained maturity in his freedom.

What is curious about God’s revelation of the Ten Commandments is that most of them could or even should be known by natural reason. Revelation is not needed to perceive these moral laws. This law is written in the hearts of all people. Why, then, did God decide to reveal the Ten Commandments to Moses? The answer can be found in our experience with sin today. Why do those people who reject the faith do so? Is it because of an intellectual rejection of the faith, or a moral rejection? For most people, it is because they do not live according to sound moral principles. Sin diminishes our ability to see moral truths clearly. Many people reject the faith not because they disagree with one or more tenants of the faith, but because they live contrary to the moral law. This is true today, and it was true with the Israelites. God reveals to the Israelites the moral law in the Ten Commandments because their sin blinds them in their ability to see what was

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<sup>195</sup> Homily of Benedict XVI on the Feast of the Assumption 2005

<sup>196</sup> Pope Benedict XVI said in his homily on the Feast of Saint Joseph, March 19, 2006: “The Decalogue, therefore, is a confirmation of the freedom won. In fact, if the Commandments are examined in depth, they are the means the Lord gives us to defend our freedom both from the internal conditionings of the passions as well as from the external abuses of the malicious. The ‘noes’ of the Commandments are as many ‘yeses’ to the growth of authentic freedom.”

<sup>197</sup> Pope Benedict XVI in gave a homily to open the conclave that would elect him pope and said that the Church must be aware of “the dictatorship of relativism.” By this he means the modern philosophy that elevates subjective values over objective truth. If the individual is not guided by something above him, then he will make his own will/desires the measure by which to act. This subverts human nature, which can subvert an entire culture by which one persons pursuit of pleasure conflicts with another which history proves leads to the powerful controlling the weak (hence, dictatorship).

<sup>198</sup> For a detailed and rich look at each Commandment see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ##2052-2557.

<sup>199</sup> “In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfillment precisely in the acceptance of that law. God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man in the commandments. God’s law does not reduce, much less do away with human freedom; rather, it protects and promotes that freedom.” (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, The Splendor of Truth, #35)

available to them by natural reason. We need the Ten Commandments today because often times our own sin blinds us from receiving the moral law written in our very nature (what is sometimes referred to as Natural Law).<sup>200</sup> We need God to remind us what we should already know. We see this today with abortion (among many other examples). The Catholic Church teaches that abortion is a grave evil, yet this is a truth that we should know without the voice of the Church.

### **A National Covenant**

After giving the law, God makes the fourth covenant with Israel.<sup>201</sup> Moses leads the people in offering a sacrifice to the Lord. After the sacrifice Moses pours half of the blood on the altar and half of the blood Moses sprinkles on the people. For the Hebrew, blood signifies life. Thus, blood poured on the altar and on the people signifies the making of a blood bond, a family bond between God and Israel. Two things in particular make a covenant: an oath and an exchange of persons. The people offer the oath when they say, “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do.”<sup>202</sup> The exchange of person is represented in the sacrifice.<sup>203</sup> This gift of self through sacrifice comes immediately after the giving of the Ten Commandments because it is in blood that the covenant of the Ten Commandments is symbolically ratified. God gives Himself through His law and his children are to return the gift of self by obedience, and this perpetuates the covenant relationship. What is offered in the Ten Commandments is symbolically ratified in the bloody sacrifice.

The covenant, however, is only a provisional covenant. These signs did not have the power to effect what they signified. The blood of animals did not have the power to effect what they signify, that is, a share in God’s very life. This covenant is only a foreshadowing of the New Covenant in which Christ will communicate to us the very life of God by sacrificing and giving us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink which truly effects a change in us, we share in his divine eternal life.<sup>204</sup>

Immediately after the sacrifice Moses goes up the mountain for forty days and nights. God speaks to Moses, giving him directives as to how the Ark of the Covenant is to be constructed, as well as the tabernacle and altar. The Lord gives detailed instruction as to how Israel is to worship as a nation of priests. During this time Moses entrusts the people to his brother Aaron with the assumption that the people would live according to the law they just received, remaining faithful to their covenant with Yahweh. Unfortunately, things are not going as well at the foot of the mountain.

### **The Golden Calf**

The people grow impatient and afraid because the mountain that Moses ascended is wrapped in fire and smoke, and forty days have not passed. They conclude Moses is

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<sup>200</sup> John Paul II defines and discusses *natural law* in his encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, ##40-53. See also Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 100, 3.

<sup>201</sup> Exodus 24

<sup>202</sup> Exodus 24:3

<sup>203</sup> Exodus 24:5,8

<sup>204</sup> Matthew 26:26-28, Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 speak of the New Covenant Christ establishes at the Last Supper. See also *Lumen Gentium*, ##4, 9.

dead.<sup>205</sup> Without the leadership of Moses they slip right back into their Egyptian idolatry.<sup>206</sup> They asked Aaron to take the gold that they have and melt it into a golden calf so they could worship as they did in Egypt. This, among other things, is a direct violation of the commandment they had just received not to make images of God. Aaron, in his fear before the hundreds of thousands of anxious people, relents and does as they request. Why, after all that Yahweh had done for them, could they so easily slip back into their old idolatry? Again, the answer is in their attachment to sin. The Scripture suggests that the people drink, eat and indulge in wild sexual gratification, "...and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play."<sup>207</sup> "To play" is a euphemism for a sexual orgy. This makes sense in context. The Israelites, following the Egyptians, worship the god Apis, in the form of a golden calf. This worship includes grave sexual sin. The calf also represents the lust for political power passed on through the firstborn, and the gold of the idol represents the pursuit of wealth. So, it is safe to infer that the people were morally weak and began to inflame their sexual immorality, culminating in the worship of a false god and their pursuit of sex, power and money.

This act of betrayal was no small thing in the eyes of God.<sup>208</sup> The Lord had just established a new covenant with His people and they turn around and almost immediately reject His love for the pursuit of physical pleasure. Israel betrays its covenant with the Lord. This is a theme we have seen many times already, beginning with Adam and Eve: God pours out His love on us and his people rebel in pursuit of temporal pleasure. It is easy to look back on Israel and condemn them for their betrayal, but we must ask ourselves do we do the same thing? Do we lose sight of the invisible God and make pleasure, or wealth or power the thing we worship with our lives?

### **Levites: a Holy Priesthood**

Yahweh looks down on this betrayal with disappointment and threatens to disown Israel. In fact, God tells Moses to go back to "your people," as if to say, "they are no longer mine."<sup>209</sup> Salvation for Israel and all humanity hangs in the balance. Here, Moses petitions God to be merciful and intercedes on behalf of the sinful people.<sup>210</sup> This is a powerful illustration of the power of intercessory prayer. God does show mercy on Israel but only in response to Moses' prayer.<sup>211</sup> With this example we see how God sometimes makes His grace dependent upon our asking for it. God does not change, but our prayers affect a different divine plan of action. This is why we should in confidence ask God for specific graces and blessings in our lives and those we pray for. We also see a change in

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<sup>205</sup> Exodus 32

<sup>206</sup> It is likely that they thought Moses had been killed since he was at the top of the mountain while lightning and storms hammered Mount Sinai, and so they may have felt abandoned and in need of some divine help, even if it came from their old gods.

<sup>207</sup> Exodus 32:6

<sup>208</sup> It is analogous to the first sin of Adam and Eve and the breaking of the covenant.

<sup>209</sup> Exodus 32:7

<sup>210</sup> Exodus 32:11-15. See also *CCC*, #210.

<sup>211</sup> God's mercy is a key theme throughout the Old Testament. Exodus 34:6 says, God is "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." God forgives the people not because they deserve to be forgiven, but out of mercy and moved by Moses' intercession. We should never doubt God's mercy for ourselves. For a good treatment on God's mercy see John Paul II's *Dives in misericordia*.

Moses. When Yahweh first spoke to him in the burning bush Moses tried to decline his role as mediator. Now we see that he willingly and proactively acts on behalf of Israel, as a father would his children. Moses, through the trials of the Exodus, has himself been transformed into a loving father to the nation of Israel. Moses could have taken the blessing for himself but instead intercedes for the people, to the point of giving up his life.<sup>212</sup> Moses is a changed man.<sup>213</sup> So we see that the sin of the golden calf could have led to Israel's destruction had it not been for Moses' intercession.

In response to Moses, the Lord blesses the Levite family line as priests (rather than the firstborn of all the tribes) because they were the one tribe that did not participate in the worship of the Golden Calf and they respond to God when He asks who in Israel is with the Lord.<sup>214</sup> They set themselves apart from the sins of the nation to act as ministers to God's will. They become the only priests in Israel because of their zeal to serve the Lord. In their service to God they kill 3,000 of their kinsmen. This sounds like a harsh penalty, and it is, but it is justice for Israel's sin in breaking the covenant they had just established with God. This apostasy could not go unpunished. Remember, they swore an oath with blood to be faithful to God, and voluntarily placed themselves under a curse of death. God could not let Israel go unpunished; otherwise there would be widespread confusion about the seriousness of the covenant and future generations would feel free to disobey. Sin is not simply an offense against God but it also harms the individual.<sup>215</sup> So, in one sense we can say that this is an act of mercy in that God maintains the covenant for future generations by inflicting judgment on those who broke the promise.

With the establishment of the Levites as the new priesthood, God requires additional sacrifices. Prior to the golden calf, daily animal sacrifices were not required. Now, God requires daily animal sacrifices by the priests in the tabernacle. Why? The Israelites were so attached to their worship of the Egyptian gods, as the incident with the golden calf proved, that God now requires Israel to remind themselves on a daily basis that they are no longer to worship the false idols but only Yahweh Himself. This should be a good lesson for us. Habitual sin can sometimes have such a grip on us that the only way to break its hold is to daily do something to fight against the vice. Whether it is alcohol, sex, the pursuit of money, or lesser manifestations of selfishness, the only way to win the battle over sin is to fight against these things everyday. Each of us must actively fight against the sin that threatens to distract us from the love of God.

Because of this serious fall, the Israelites must spend an entire year at Mount Sinai, during which time God renews the broken covenant.<sup>216</sup> Moses must ascend the Mountain for a second time in which God will give him the second law, the law of daily sacrifice to keep them from idolatry. It is also at this time that God gives Moses the prescriptions as to the building of a tabernacle, as well as the plan for the Temple that is handed down

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<sup>212</sup> Exodus 32:32

<sup>213</sup> John Paul II said, "Life is the struggle to abandon ego and become a gift of self." This is what Moses has become, a gift for others.

<sup>214</sup> Exodus 32:26

<sup>215</sup> CCC, #1459

<sup>216</sup> Exodus 34

through the generations, eventually to be built by Solomon.<sup>217</sup> Moses builds the Ark according to God's instructions and the glory cloud of the Lord's presence descends upon it. We see, again, that God desires to use the physical world to make His presence known. Yes, God wants to be in our hearts, but He also wants us to honor Him in places set apart for His worship. This is why a church building, or a Eucharistic chapel has a special place in our life of faith.<sup>218</sup> God dwells in our hearts but He also wants a place set apart for us to worship Him in a unique and holy way. This is what holy means: to be set apart. We sanctify a place when we set it apart for divine worship, and should desire to make it a beautiful and dignified space for holy worship.

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<sup>217</sup> Exodus 40

<sup>218</sup> CCC, ##1179-1186