

An Examination of the Golden Calf Incident, Exodus 32:1-6

We would think that, with God's extensive, clear and meticulous directions for the construction of his tabernacle still ringing in their ears, the people of Israel would be careful to obey the word of the Lord at all points. However, such was not the case. We would imagine that, with the Lord God's instructions of the tabernacle as the place in which he would dwell among his people, Ex 25:8, fresh on their ears and hearts, the people of Israel would refrain from worshiping the gods of the nations. However, this truth had departed from them. We would tend to believe that the people of Israel would rejoice in their Creator and Redeemer who had supernaturally delivered them from Egyptian bondage and who had sought to demonstrate his unique covenant affection for them as his chosen people from among all the nations of the earth, Ex 19:5-6; Dt 7:6; 14:2; etc., by dwelling among them. Sadly, this was not to be.

What had caused God's people to turn from him, the God who is Spirit and consequently invisible, and who in the most dramatic and terrifying way had revealed himself to his people by *words*: "Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice." Dt 4:12? See also Jn 4:24. They saw no form when the Lord spoke to them out of the midst of the fire on Mt. Horeb, Dt 4:15. In this regard, we should remember that Yahweh had gathered his people there not to behold the terrifying scene of the fire, the eddying smoke and the trembling mountain. We should never forget that Israel had not been gathered there to listen to the deafening sound of the trumpet, Ex 19:18-19. No! God had assembled his quivering people to constitute them as his covenant people by explaining his Person and work in their redemption and to grant them his laws, obedience to which would demonstrate to the nations that he alone was their true and living God. This he did by speaking to them in words, "in thunder", v. 19. To this end, Moses confirmed "... on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, ...'" Dt 4:10. The answer to the question, what caused Israel to turn from "The God of Israel [who] denies any possible expression of himself in visual form." [Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 92], is that **God's people had forgotten and had forsaken his word**. They had forgotten and had not remembered the word of the Lord their God. These terms *forgotten* and *not remembered* describe nothing less than the apostasy of God's people. [R. C. Sproul, ed. *Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 975].

Israel's neglect in hearing God's word was by no means a minor event in her life. It was a major transgression marking a fundamental turning away from God whose word was their very life and obedience to which afforded them the privilege of living long in the Promised Land, Dt 32:47. It was a rejection of their Creator and Redeemer; it was a reversal of the gospel principle of walking by faith and not by sight, 2 Cor 5:7 [Ellul, *ibid.*, 87]. In forsaking the word of God, Israel showed themselves to be an evil people, refusing God's words and stubbornly following their own hearts by going after other gods to serve and worship them, Jer 13:10. The weeping prophet continually emphasized the deliberate character of Israel's act when he states "They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them." 11:10. Ezekiel, a prophet in exile, also lamented the same sinful situation: "'As for you, O house of Israel, thus says the Lord GOD: Go serve every one of you his idols, now and hereafter, if you will not listen to me; ...'" Eze 20:39.