

Immerse Day 35 :: March 19

“The Golden Calf” is such a well-known story that most everyone knows it, inside the church and out. But a closer reading reveals some things about God with which we are very uncomfortable. In fact, this story seems to reveal a God we may not even recognize.

Sure, we know God gets angry, even angry at people. But here we see the God we recognize (All Knowing God tells Moses what the Israelites are up to at the foot of the mountain) mixed in with a God that seems foreign, even contrary to our God. He offers to wipe out His own people and start again with Moses as the New Abraham. He is persuaded to change His mind by Moses who sides with his own people so much he is willing to take their punishment on himself. He even sends the Levites into the camp with swords to kill their own people, even their own families. And then He blesses them for it!

For many, stories like this in the OT seem so far removed from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. How do we reconcile (1) the God of grace who so loves the world that He gives His only begotten Son, (2) the God who sent the Levites among their own people to kill them and then blessed them for it, and (3) the fact that God doesn't change?

A few things come to light through this passage and others like it, but even these thoughts don't answer our question well.

First, we see just how dangerous idolatry is. Many theologians will say that all sin is rooted in idolatry, putting something above God in importance, even ourselves. God's wrath toward His people is triggered by their enormous idolatry just months after witnessing God's salvation from Egypt.

Second, God gets angry. If we believe the myth of a tranquil, sleepy, anything-goes God, we are believing, well, a myth. God is real, with real character and real emotions. He is jealous, He is passionate, and He gets really, really angry. We see this again and again, yet our own discomfort with anger, especially when directed toward us, makes us avoid this common emotion of God. He gets angry, but He doesn't take that anger out on us, thank God.

Third, God can change His mind. But whenever God changes His mind in the scriptures, He changes it toward grace. Whether with Abraham, Moses, or Jonah, God always changes toward grace, never away from it. How can an all-knowing God change His mind, or worse be convinced by a human argument? Many will cop out and say “He planned it that way all along,” and then not deal with the fact that this means God is tricking us, in effect lying to us. We just have to accept that God changes His mind, but always toward grace.

Fourth, there is real consequence for sin, especially idolatry. With our constant preaching of grace and forgiveness, we have forgotten the effects of sin. Sin brings death, it destroys relationships, and it deeply wounds both us and God. There is no such thing as a sin that doesn't hurt anybody. Consenting or not, any sin between two people hurts God, and it hurts us, even if we don't recognize the hurt immediately.

So what do we do with this theological contradiction? We bring it to God and ask Him. Have you ever prayed about this question, and then waited to hear God's answer? Do that tonight, and just see what He might say. But always remember, God is God, and He doesn't need to justify Himself to us.