

The Golden Calf

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

6 September 2026

Children's Talk: An Uncut Stone

We are going to talk about altars today. An altar is a bit like a table or a platform that is used for worship. It can be as simple as a pile of soil, or as complicated as a large metal structure. Thousands of years ago, people would bring offerings to the Lord and then burn them on the altar. We don't do that anymore, but we do have an altar in this church: it is the rock that has a copy of the Word on it.

When the Children of Israel entered the land of Canaan they made an altar to worship the Lord with, and they made it out of rock:

Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: "an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool." And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. (Joshua 8:30-32)

This altar had to be made of stones; but not just any stones: whole stones, that no one had used on iron tool on. This is an interesting detail. You might think that you could build a better altar by shaping the stones. If one is too pointy, smash the tip off. If one is too big, chisel a piece off it. But no, the Lord said they could only use stones that were exactly as they found them. They couldn't change their shape. They then wrote the Lord's laws on the stones. This is also true actually of the altar in the church: no one cut this stone to be the right shape. It's shaped exactly like it was when people found it.

This tells us something about how we are supposed to treat the Lord's rules: we aren't supposed to change them to say what we want them to say. We do try to do that sometimes with the things other people say: maybe your mom says that if there is time after dinner you can watch a movie. When there isn't actually time, and

so you can't watch a movie, you might say, "but mom! You *promised* we could!"

You've tried to change what she said to fit with what you want to do.

It's really important that we not do that with the things the Lord teaches us:

- If the Lord says we have to love our enemies, we can't change it to mean we have to love our enemies unless they're really mean to us.
- If the Lord says do not steal, we can't change that to mean you can only steal from people who have stolen things from you.
- If the Lord says not to judge other people, we can't change that to mean you can judge people but only when you really know for sure that they are bad people.

We can't change the Lord's rules to be what we want them to be. We have to take them as they are, like an uncut stone.

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Most of us have heard the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. The part we might spend less time thinking about is what everyone else was up to while Moses was on the mountain. It turns out to be not so great. And yet very relevant to our own experience.

The background to the story is that the Children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for centuries. In that time they had forgotten all about the Lord. But the Lord called Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. Through Moses, the Lord sent plagues on the Egyptians, until the Pharaoh relented and let them go. They travelled out into the wilderness until they came to Mt. Sinai. Moses went up the mountain and there encountered God, who gave him the Ten Commandments and instructions for building the Tabernacle. Moses spent 40 days and nights on the mountain, while Aaron was left in charge of the people. Having spent a few chapters describing what Moses heard on the mountain, the scene shifts to the people down below:

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." (Exodus 32:1)

After 40 days of waiting the people had given up on Moses, their main link to Jehovah, the Lord. So they demanded that Aaron give them a new god, one that they felt would be more present and relatable. Moses seemed so distant and far-off that they turned to another, self-created thing to lead them.

The Teachings of the New Church explain that Moses represents the Lord's Word. This makes sense: Moses was the lawgiver for Israel, the author of the first

five books of the Word. In fact, Jesus at times used the term “Moses” as shorthand for the whole Old Testament. Moses not only stands for the Word, but also specifically the internal sense of the Word, the inner meaning that reveals the nature of the Lord and His love and truth, and that enables us to connect with the Lord and to grow spiritually, so that we can become heavenly people. So given that Moses represents all of this, what does it represent when the people say, “as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Exodus 32:1)?

Have you ever read the Word, and come away feeling, “there wasn’t anything really deep or meaningful about any of that; there didn’t seem to be anything relevant to me or my life; it felt pretty devoid of spiritual significance or the presence of the Lord”? Sometimes this is just a fleeting thought or feeling; but when it lasts and becomes our primary experience of the Word, we are in a similar position to the Israelites, giving up on Moses ever coming back down the Mountain. The Teachings of the New Church describe it as a state in which,

it is altogether unknown what other Divine truth there is in the Word, which raises man from what is external into what is internal, and makes the church, than that which stands forth in the sense of the letter. (*Secrets of Heaven* §10400)

The church says that the Word contains these deep truths that transform our lives. And yet sometimes our overall experience is that there isn’t anything more to this book than a random collection, of often strange, stories. That experience can extend beyond the Word where all spiritual things might feel lacking or out of reach. Your relationship with your partner can feel empty or devoid of a meaningful connection. Work can feel purposeless and without any real use or contribution to the world. Hobbies or other things that you do for entertainment can feel dry and stale. The things that are supposed to make life worth living, to connect us to other people or

the Lord, to connect us more deeply with something spiritual within ourselves, don't always feel that way at all. And that feeling can run very deep and last a long time.

When we find ourselves in this state of life there is a temptation to turn to other things to fill the void. This is what is represented by the next part of the story, where the Israelites create a golden calf to worship:

And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received it from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a moulded calf.

Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to Jehovah." Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. (Exodus 32:2-6)

In the absence of Moses or anyone else to confirm their connection to God, they created their own idol. What are the things we look to when we are disconnected from spiritual realities? In general, the worship of the golden calf stands for superficial pleasure and cravings, driven by a love for oneself and for worldly things (*Secrets of Heaven* §10407). When we have no sense of anything internal or spiritual, the desire for these things can easily rise to the forefront of our focus. What are these things for us specifically? What form might they take in your life? There are obvious ones: food, money, sex, entertainment; but also less obvious ones: approval, acceptance, pride, achievement, worldly success and affirmation.

There are two details in this story that will help us understand this state of life a bit better. Firstly, the calf was said to be fashioned with a tool ("he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a moulded calf" (Exodus 32:4)). In the Word, using tools to craft something usually refers to the ways that we construct arguments in favour of what we want, rather

than simply listening to the Lord. Interestingly, it is a tradition to use an uncut stone, left in its natural state, as an altar in some churches, including this one. It is unshaped by human hands, as a way of acknowledging that we are to listen to the Lord's own words rather than bending His words to suit our wants. Instead, in this story the idol was shaped and crafted; highlighting our tendency:

to prepare false teachings from one's own intelligence, which is done by applying the sense of the letter of the Word in favour of the loves of self and of the world. (*Secrets of Heaven* §10406)

When we go to the Word and our goal is to find a way to justify pursuing pleasure or elevating ourselves over others, then we are crafting a golden idol. We are particularly vulnerable to doing this when nothing deeper feels attainable and we are desperate for something, anything, to fill that void. What justifications do we use to allow ourselves to seek meaning in worldly things? Have to love self first; the Lord wants me to be happy; I've done a lot of good for other people, I'm entitled to getting my own back; material things are a blessing from the Lord. In other circumstances these might even have some truth to them; but when used to justify worldly things, they are falsities crafted from our own thinking.

The second detail, which sounds bizarre when you think about it, is that having just made the idol themselves, they then worshipped it as if it were the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt ("they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'" (Exodus 32:4)). The Teachings of the New Church explain that this represents the attitude that we have to rely on ourselves and ourselves alone if we are to get what we want in this world (*Secrets of Heaven* §10409). We can find ample evidence for this point of view: many of the most successful people simply take what they want and don't wait for anyone else to give

them what they need. People who trust in others are left wanting and disappointed. This cynical attitude sneers at the idea of trusting in the Lord.

What's interesting is how we interpret even our own past experiences of how the Lord has helped us: just as the Children of Israel, who had experienced first hand the Lord leading them out of slavery, later attributed their rescue to their self-made idol, we can look back on times the Lord really has been there for us and spiritual reality really has felt extremely relevant and important, and reinterpret it simply as our own efforts carrying us through a hard time. If you're in a moment of truly feeling the Lord's presence it can feel impossible to doubt it. And yet when you are in this disconnected state, you can wonder how you ever believed the Lord was there at all.

This might provide a useful understanding of this specific experience of life; but it doesn't give any clear answers on how to get out of it. Part of the problem is perhaps feeling disconnected from spiritual reality makes us less self-aware and so it is hard to recognize in the first place. On top of that, our natural reaction is to make the bad feelings go away by reaching for the most convenient and accessible things that feel good, regardless of whether they are actually good for us.

Rather than thinking of how to fix that feeling it might be more useful to think in terms of what we can do while it lasts. If we go back to the beginning of the story, remember that at the exact same time the people gave up on Moses, Moses himself was up on the mountain talking directly with God and receiving the Ten Commandments. Had the people been able to wait patiently, in time he would have returned to them, and they could have received clarity that the Lord was going to lead them and give them guidance and instruction that would transform their lives and their relationship with God. That is what also waits for us if we can find the patience to be able to sit with the feeling of being distant from God and spiritual

reality. So rather than trying to fix a feeling, the most important thing is to try to recognise the temptation to “give up” when a spiritual reality feels far off or meaningless and to resist the allure of chasing natural pleasures to give meaning and satisfaction to life. If we can try to wait for the Lord even when we barely believe in the Lord, He will in time lead us to feel that He is, once again, present and in control of life.

Wait on the LORD;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the LORD!
(Psalms 27:14)

Amen.