

Exodus 32 - “The Golden Calf Incident”

Chapter 32 changes gears quite drastically here. We’ve been tracking with Moses up on the mountaintop as he’s receiving instructions from the Lord for the tabernacle. It’s a glorious scene, yet now in Chapter 32 we’re reminded of what’s going on back on the ground. It reveals for us this reality that we still encounter today: The power of God above (atop the mountain), sin and rebellion below (on the ground) but in the middle where Moses was, a tabernacle, where sinful man can meet with a loving God.

God was making all the arrangements to bless His people, but the people grew impatient and took matters into their own hands.

We’re reminded in this account that it was not hard to get Israel out of Egypt, but it was another thing altogether to get Egypt out of Israel.

32:1-4 - *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.”² 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.”³ So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron.⁴ And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!”*

1st Problem: Lack of Faith – 32:1

All the people saw that Moses **delayed**. It’s not that Moses delayed, it’s that God was still at work.

The people down below aren’t sure what happened to Moses, they don’t realize that God is bringing forth His good and perfect plan, so they come up with their own plan.

- Isn’t that the way we often operate when we think God is delaying? When we don’t have immediate answers, we tend to stop walking by faith and move into our own course of action. All we end up doing is wasting our God given treasures and we end up with an inferior outcome.
- “Failure to trust God is sin, and it leads to countless other sins.”¹

¹ Merida, T. (2014). *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (p. 194). Holman Reference.

We see this as the scene continues on...

2nd Problem: Appeasing the People – 32:2a

Not only did the people lack faith and lack trust in God, but Aaron's big folly was having a fear of man rather than of God. He sought to please men rather than please God (**Galatians 1:10**, "*For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.*").

- A fear of man causes you to compromise and be conflicted in doing what God shows you to do.

So instead of trusting God and fearing Him, they gave up on Him and created a new god for themselves.

3rd Problem: Disobedience – 32:2-3

Notice the repetition of the word break in vv. 2+3. The very gifts that God had given them they broke off. It's symbolic of the covenant they were now breaking. This precious gift of God's commands that were to ensure life were now being thrown aside.

They had responded favorably and affirmed the Lord's covenant with them by responding in Exodus 24:3, "*...And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do."*"

That didn't last long did it?? Moses has been up on the mountain for 40 days. We're not talking a year or months, but weeks. People are fickle. And before we begin to seethe with holy indignation at the fickleness of Israel, how often do we break God's Word? How often do we let little sins slide? Every single yielding to temptation is every bit a breaking of God's commands, no matter if it's producing an ungodly attitude, or producing a golden calf!

- We're good at categorizing sins and thinking that there's safe or acceptable sins, and then there's other one's that are the more heinous sins. But every sin begins in the heart. It's seen before God. And every sin is a turning aside from God's best.
- The thing that plagued Israel over and over was idolatry. That was a gross misconduct of their loyalty to God. But this began in the heart. We can look at idolatry and think, I never succumb to that. But this is more than just fashioning a physical idol and worshipping it. This becomes about giving your loyalty to another (whether a person or thing) in place of God.

4th Problem: Idolatry – 32:4-5

You could certainly wrap this up in the third problem of Disobedience, but I want to look at this on its own.

“What is idolatry? Idolatry is putting something or someone in the place of God. Idols are counterfeit gods. Anything you seek to give you what only Christ can give you (joy, security, peace, meaning, significance, identity, and salvation) becomes an idol. Many do not believe idolatry is a problem because they only associate idolatry with shrines, temples, and carved images. But heart idolatry exists everywhere. Common idols include money, sex, a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, beauty, brains, and success and ambition.” ²

If our pursuit or our comfort rest in these things more than they do God, you have an idol.

And it all comes down to Israel’s first problem seen in this passage – are you going to trust God? Are you going to surrender to Him and live for Him, or are you going to remain tied to other things in hopes they will provide the help you need?

People move into idolatry when they perceive God how they want Him to be. Today there are many that will say, *‘I don’t believe that God would judge people for doing what they want. As long as we’re loving one another. As long as we’re not hurting one another. God is love, and that’s all He wants.’*

This is creating an idol for yourself because that’s not the complete picture of God, that’s not the God of the Bible.

- “Worship, to be true, must be based on a right perception of God. The book of Exodus emphasizes the importance of knowing God as He truly is, and not as we imagine Him to be.” ³
- People too often make God into their own image, in so doing they are guilty of idolatry.

So Aaron ***received the gold from their hand***... The gold that was going to be used for the building of the temple and its furnishings. They replaced God’s best, for an inferior product. That’s what idolatry and sin will always do.

Aaron took this gold and fashioned it into a molded calf.

² Merida, T. (2014). *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (p. 192). Holman Reference.

³ Alexander, T. D. (1994). Exodus. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 116). Inter-Varsity Press.

Why a calf? Because this is what they've seen in Egypt. This was a principal god in Egypt – Apis. More so, “this was seen as the vehicle on which a god rode in power, and as such they identified it as divine itself” (Velikovsky).

- Some would argue that in making this golden calf they were doing so to worship Yahweh. But they were not worshipping Yahweh in the prescribed way or in an honoring way. Look at what Aaron attempted to do in vv. 5-6...

“*Calf* is not a good translation of the Hebrew *egel*. A young bull in his first strength is meant: for instance, the word can describe a three-year-old animal (Genesis 15:9).”⁴

32:5-6 - *So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.”⁶ 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.*

Aaron tried to mix these two forms of worship. It was a compromise. But never are we to try and blend what is divine with what is not. That why we're called to be holy. Aaron would eventually wear that headpiece with the words “Holiness To The Lord” on it (Ex 28:36). All we do for the Lord is to be set apart for Him, it's to be sanctified and holy. It's not to be tainted by that which is not set apart for Him. Aaron is far from that here. They're trying to take an act of worship to God but combine it with that which is not of God.

When you read that ***the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play***, it's not depicting an innocent act. The idea here is that they were carousing with one another. Most likely in sexual activity, but immorally at the least.

It never goes well when you enter into a life of compromise. When you think you can blend that which is of God and that which is of the world. It's been said that there are many people who have too much of the world in them to be happy in Jesus, but too much Jesus in them to be happy in the world.

- Straddling the fence is a dangerous and uncomfortable place to be.

“Today there is a whole church culture that reflects this story. We want to do away with what Scripture says about worship and do it our way. As a result, the attenders are mere consumers of worship, and they are led by Aaron-like

⁴ Guzik, D. (2013). *Exodus* (Ex 32:2–4). David Guzik.

individuals who pander to the people. By contrast, God’s way of worship puts the gospel on display. God-centered, gospel-saturated worship shows sinners how they can be forgiven and worship the Holy One. That is what the tabernacle displayed—the gospel.

We must remember that worship is about glorifying God, not gratifying self. The golden calf is what people wanted. The calf could not talk. The calf was not feared. The calf could be manipulated for one’s own desires. People do not want a holy God who speaks and confronts them. Be careful: you can do things “in the name” of the Lord but still not worship the Lord. Be careful: you can have some orthodox acts of worship (they had a feast and made offerings) but worship unacceptably.”⁵

32:7-8 - *And the Lord said to Moses, “Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.⁸ They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ ”*

I love the exchanges between God and Moses. Moses often said, they’re Your people! He’ll say this in 32:11. Here God says, ***For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt...***

- It’s like parents saying: ‘Do you know what your son/daughter did today??’
When they act rotten, they’re always the other persons child right?

32:9-13 - *And the Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!¹⁰ Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.”¹¹ Then Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, and said: “Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?¹² Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, ‘He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people.¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your*

⁵ Merida, T. (2014). *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (pp. 195–196). Holman Reference.

descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ”

It's interesting how the Lord calls them a ***stiff-necked people***. This is the first time He calls Israel this, though it won't be the last. It's elsewhere translated *obstinate* (Isaiah 48:4) and *hard-hearted* (Ezekiel 3:7).

Stiff-necked means stubborn. It's interesting that this may be a fitting description of a cow. It's like the people were becoming like what they worshipped. It's what the Word of God says will happen:

- **Psalm 115:4–8**, *"Their idols are silver and gold, The work of men's hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; ⁶ They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell; ⁷ They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat. ⁸ Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them."*

Now in vs. 10 God gives Moses a way out. He proposes striking this group down and starting over with Moses. That's a pretty lucrative offer. How many of us would need some time to consider that?

Now this offer was originally given to Abraham. But Moses isn't moved by selfish ambition, he's moved with compassion for the people.

Notice how Moses begins to intercede for the nation. Moses pleads with God based on:

- 1) His Grace – ***whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt...*** (vs.11). The people didn't deserve His deliverance then. He's acted all along by His grace. Why stop now?
- 2) His Glory – ***why should the Egyptians speak, and say, He brought them out to harm them, to kill them...*** (vs. 12). Moses' concern was that this could be an occasion for others to mock God or deny God. Don't give people the opportunity to question Your might and wisdom in delivering this people.
- 3) His Goodness – ***Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self...*** (vs. 13). God had already promised to multiply the descendants of Abraham. Yes, He could start over, but it would be a little different than His original promise.

Moses displays the heart of an intercessor, pleading with God on behalf of others. Notice the outcome...

32:14-16 - *So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people. ¹⁵ And Moses turned and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the Testimony were in his hand. The tablets were written on both sides; on the one side and on the other they were written. ¹⁶ Now the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets.*

The Lord *relented*. The KJV uses the word *repented*. Did God repent? Did God change His mind? Did God have to be calmed down from a fit of rage?

The problem here is with language. Moses uses anthropomorphic language here (man-centered language). This is using human language in an attempt to describe an infinite, outside of humanity, God. It doesn't always mesh.

Numbers 23:19, *"God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"*

So what's happening here? God through His actions, put it into the heart of Moses to pray and intercede in this way. Moses was inspired by God to do this. Moses' prayer didn't change God, but it did change the standing of the people in God's sight.

- Moses was developing and displaying God's own heart for the people through this encounter.
- God calls us to intercede for others too. As we do, we develop God's heart for people.
- God is often looking for someone to stand in the gap – **Ezekiel 22:30**, *"So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one."*

"This is really the story of our own salvation. God is up on his holy mountain; we are down on earth. And like the Israelites, we are floundering in the folly of our rebellion against God. Our idolatry leads to immorality. What we need is someone like Moses. We need someone to come down and intercede for us—someone who can turn away God's wrath.

The message of the gospel is that God has given us a mediator. When he saw our sin, he wanted to save us; so he sent his Son to intercede for our salvation. As the Scripture says, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). It is as if God said, "Go down, Jesus, go down. Go down because your people—the ones I gave you from all eternity—have become corrupt. They are

living in sin. They have turned away from my law to worship other gods. And unless you intercede for them, they will surely be destroyed by my wrath.”⁶

32:17-19 - *And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.”¹⁸ But he said: “It is not the noise of the shout of victory, Nor the noise of the cry of defeat, But the sound of singing I hear.”¹⁹ So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing. So Moses’ anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.* (It was at this moment Moses realized he should have bought the Apple care).

The people were giving their all in their worship of this fake God. It sounded like war in the camp. More so it was spiritual warfare. The enemy was having a heyday among the people.

Moses breaking these tablets again was symbolic of how Israel had broken their covenant with God. They have broken the first three commandments in this act:

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make for yourself a carved image.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

32:20-24 - *Then he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it.²¹ And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?”²² So Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil.²³ For they said to me, ‘Make us gods that shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’²⁴ And I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out.”*

This almost seems like an overreaction to have the people drink this idol powder. But Moses was having the people identify with their sin. It let them see the futility and harm that comes with turning aside from God’s ways to follow our own ways. They’re now drinking a god they were worshipping. It doesn’t get much more

⁶ Ryken, P. G., & Hughes, R. K. (2005). *Exodus: saved for God’s glory* (p. 994). Crossway Books.

futile than that. And remember, what goes in must come out. They're gonna have some colorful waste, but it's again a lesson of idolatry. No matter how colorful it might be, it's just a bunch of waste!

It's interesting how Aaron was quick to pass blame to others – ***You know the people, that they are set on evil.*** It's like the oldest trick in the book – going right back to Adam blaming Eve (Gen 3:12 – *the woman whom You gave to be with me*).

- We're so prone to try and find excuses or pass blame. What God wants from us is simply confession; owning our sin and coming to Him in repentance.
- **Psalm 34:18**, *"The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit."*
- **Psalm 51:17**, *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise."*
- **Proverbs 28:13**, *"He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy."*

Aaron tells the truth to Moses as far as where he got the goods for the calf, but then commits a huge lie in saying, ***this calf came out.*** He gives the old 'it just happened' excuse. Yet it was not something that just happened. Sin rarely is. It's a slippery slope that we too need to be careful of.

- Temptation was there; he walked in compromise, and acted upon that temptation. He could have stopped at any time.
- Too many people have followed into a sin, and come out saying, 'it just kind of happened', as though they didn't know what was going on, or didn't have any control. We need to be aware that the enemy is constantly opposing us and wanting to trip us up. We need to stand guard and know that God always gives us a way out. But we need to use it!

32:25-29 - *Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies),²⁶ then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, "Whoever is on the Lord's side—come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him.²⁷ And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.'* " ²⁸ So the

sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. ²⁹ Then Moses said, “Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother.”

If you thought Moses having them drink their idol protein shake was an overreaction, you may feel the same about this scene. It seems like this is a little harsh. But you have to take into account what's riding on this too. God is looking to preserve a nation that would uphold His Word, remain true and pure, and eventually bring the Messiah into the world. If this nation lost the plot, it could disrupt the salvation of future generations.

So Moses has the idolaters cut off so that this sin would not continue to infect the camp and bring further ruin.

- If you had cancer, do you just treat it gently; let it linger to see if it might change? Or do you do whatever you need to get it removed?

An opportunity is given for people to take a stand and repent and choose to stand on the Lord's side. This chance is continually given to all people as long as you are breathing. It's never too late. There's never a cause by which you forfeit the right to choose the Lord.

Here we see it's the Levites who take a stand. Interesting because Aaron was of the house of Levi. Perhaps they joined in with him and have now seen the futility of their actions. They've been moved to repentance and are reestablishing their covenant with God.

The Levites had to take a real stand here. They had to oppose their neighbor for the sake of truth. This didn't seem like the loving thing to do, but truth needed to prevail even above a seemingly unloving action. But it's love for God that must always lead our actions toward others.

As they went out with their swords we're told that about 3,000 men died that day. Interestingly when the Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost we read that 3,000 people were saved.

- **2 Corinthians 3:6**, *“...for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”*

Because the Levites took such a stand for God, they would receive a blessing. They would be consecrated, set apart, as the priestly tribe. They would have the privilege of serving God in the tabernacle.

It's a reminder that blessing follows obedience. Greater responsibility follows faithfulness.

32:30-35 - *Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." ³¹ Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! ³² Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written." ³³ And the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. ³⁴ Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin." ³⁵ So the Lord plagued the people because of what they did with the calf which Aaron made.*

Here we see Moses interceding once again. The first time he interceded for the people he was not aware of the gravity of their sin. Now he's seen it and decided he needs to make atonement for their sin.

And this is something Moses seems to think that no lamb or bull is sufficient for. Rather he willingly offers himself as the sacrifice! He's willing to be blotted out of the book.

And we once again see the great heart of Moses. It's the kind of attitude you see in a good leader. He prayed for his life to be lost for the sake of saving others.

- It's what Paul prayed for his own people: **Romans 9:3**, *"For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh,"*

What is the book which Moses asks to be blotted out from? It's the book of Life mentioned in Psalm 69:28 and Revelation 3:5

- **Psalm 69:28**, *"Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, And not be written with the righteous."*
- **Revelation 3:5**, *"He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels."*

Ultimately, Moses couldn't stand as their substitute. Moses was a sinner like them. Every person must deal with their own sin: ***Whoever has sinned against***

Me, I will blot him out of My book. But here's the problem, under this requirement, who can stand? Nobody can! That's why God was giving the tabernacle. To provide atonement for their sin. But this was all looking ahead to the ultimate sacrifice, the sinless One who would become our righteousness. Jesus displayed this heart of Moses in giving His life a ransom for all.

- **1 Peter 3:18**, *"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,"*

And now, even though there's been rebellion in the camp, God will continue to lead His people. If you're willing to follow and follow obediently, you'll be provided for. The Angel (Jesus) will go before them and be their help.

Nevertheless, there is consequences for sin and rebellion. You reap what you sow (Galatians 6:7). A plague was sent upon the people. We don't know what, or what the outcome was, but we learn that you never get away with your sin.

Thankfully we have One that has laid down His life for sin. Receive Him, worship Him, and don't let any idols into your life that would come between you and Jesus. He's the greatest thing that has ever happened to us. There are no replacements or substitutes, just a bunch of counterfeits that might look shiny, but is just a bunch of waste!