

## **The Golden Calf: Yahweh's Grace and Presence**

Exodus 32–34

Turn to Exodus 32 please. In the golden calf story, Israelites nearly lost the most important thing they had before they even had it: the presence of Yahweh travelling with them in their midst.

In Exodus 24, God and Israel covenanted with each other. God, Yahweh, would be Israel's God, and Israel would be Yahweh's people. In the very next chapter, God begins to tell Moses how to make the tabernacle, the God-tent. God wanted to move into the Israelite camp.

They lived in tents, so God would live in the middle of their camp in the tabernacle, his God-tent. While Moses was on the top of Mt Sinai, finding out how God wanted his tent made, Israel got into trouble. Moses was gone for forty days. Let's read from Exodus 32:1.

### **1 Israel's Idolatry – Exodus 32:1–6**

*When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us a god who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."*

"Make us a god who will go before us." What happened to Yahweh? He had been silent, and they no longer trusted him. "Make us a god who will go before us, will lead us." "As for this Moses, who brought us up out of Egypt." Who brought them out of Egypt? Moses? No, Yahweh brought them out of Egypt. But they did not even mention Yahweh.

<sup>4</sup> *Aaron made an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "This is your god, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."*

So fast those people left Yahweh. Now their god is a metal calf made for them in front of their eyes. This is what repeatedly got Israel in trouble in the Old Testament. NOT that they could not keep all of God's instructions. Not that. Rather, they traded God in for an idol. "This golden calf we just made brought us up out of Egypt. Let's worship it." Israel did this many times, leaving the true God for a man-made god, and that is why the Old Testament is not a happy story.

### **2 Yahweh's Anger, Moses Prays, Yahweh Relents – Exodus 32:7–14**

<sup>7</sup> *Then Yahweh said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. Israel said that the golden calf was its god. "Fine," says God, "if that's your god then I am not your God and you are not my people."*

<sup>7</sup> *Then Yahweh said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt ... <sup>10</sup> Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."*

*Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and I may destroy them.* Why does God say “leave me alone so I can do this? What if Moses does NOT leave God alone? Yahweh seems to say, “I am angry enough to destroy them, Moses, but if you pray for them, maybe I will not do it.” In a roundabout way, angry Yahweh invites Moses to pray for Israel.

*Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and I may destroy them.* <sup>11</sup> *But Moses sought the favor of Yahweh his God. “Yahweh,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?”*

*Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and I may destroy them.* <sup>11</sup> *But Moses sought the favor of Yahweh his God.* That summarizes what’s going on in this story. God is angry at Israel, but he gives Moses an opening, and Moses uses it.

Did you notice the disagreement about whose people Israel is? <sup>7</sup> *Then Yahweh said to Moses, “Go down, because **your** people, whom **you** brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.* Verse 11: “Yahweh,” Moses said, “why should your anger burn against **your** people, whom **you** brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?”

Verse 14: *Then Yahweh relented and did not bring on **his** people the disaster he had planned.* The writer of Exodus agrees with Moses on this one. They are God’s people, not Moses’ people, and God not Moses brought them out of Egypt. And God relented, he decided not to destroy Israel after all. Whew!

Verse 19: *When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.* The two tablets were the covenant written out, the agreement between God and Israel. Moses smashed them in anger, but he did so because Israel had broken the covenant.

By worshipping the golden calf and their wild partying, they had broken the covenant with God. Israel had already smashed the covenant by their actions. That’s why Moses threw them down to break them.

The Old Testament God is not a God of law. If he was, he would have abandoned Israel that very day. By the terms of the covenant, he had full right to do so. He relented. He relented many, many times in the Old Testament.

### **3 Moses Prays for Yahweh to Forgive Israel’s Great Sin – Exodus 32:30–35**

Yahweh has agreed not to destroy Israel, but that’s all. He would not destroy the nation. Moses asks for more. He wants Yahweh to forgive Israel’s great sin.

<sup>30</sup> *The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to Yahweh; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”* <sup>31</sup> *So Moses went back to Yahweh and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves a god of gold.”* <sup>32</sup> *But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”*

Moses never hints that the sin of Israel is not so bad. It's bad. He said, "what a great sin these people have committed." At first he just wanted Israel not to be destroyed. Now he asks for forgiveness. And Moses binds himself to the people. "If you don't forgive **them**, and take **them** back, then don't take **me**, either. Take **my** name out of your book." Yahweh had offered to destroy Israel and make a nation out of Moses. Moses wanted no part of that.

<sup>33</sup> *Yahweh replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. <sup>34</sup> Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin."* <sup>35</sup> *And Yahweh struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.*

So God sends a plague, but it certainly did not destroy Israel. God says, "I decide whose name comes out of my book. But then, (verse 34) *lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you.* God now agrees to take the people to the promised land. And God's angel will go before Israel.

Yahweh could have agreed not to destroy Israel, but then just walked away, left Israel alone. But now he won't do that. He will make sure that Israel gets to the promised land. On the other hand, God had been planning to tabernacle among the Israelites. What happened to that? That will be the third stage of Yahweh's grace.

#### 4 Yahweh's Presence will Go With Israel – Exodus 33:1–18

33:1 *Then Yahweh said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' <sup>2</sup> I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites [and all the rest]. <sup>3</sup> Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. **But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.**"*

<sup>4</sup> *When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. <sup>5</sup> For Yahweh had said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites, 'You are a stiff-necked people. **If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you.** Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.'"* <sup>6</sup> *So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.*

So God has agreed not to destroy Israel, and then he has agreed to forgive them. He has agreed to send an angel to get them into the promised land. But he will not travel with them, because they are so sinful. He knows he might explode against them if he was that close.

Now, for the first time, Israel wakes up to what it has lost. Yahweh will not go with them. "*I will not go with you because you are a stiff-necked people.*" They were distressed, and they mourned.

(33:13) *Moses: If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is **your** people.* In different words, "God if you are pleased with me, teach me your ways, and also, God, if you are pleased with me, you will remember that this nation is **your** people."

<sup>14</sup> *Yahweh replied, “My Presence will go with **you**, and I will give **you** rest.”* The “you” in this verse is singular in Hebrew. God’s presence is not going with all Israel, just with Moses. *My Presence will go with you, Moses, and I will give you rest, Moses.*

But Moses was still not satisfied: <sup>15</sup> *Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with **us**, do not send **us** up from here. [We’re not moving with just your angel.]* <sup>16</sup> *How will anyone know that you are pleased **with me and with your people** unless you go **with us**? What else will distinguish **me and your people** from all the other people on the face of the earth?”*

On the one hand, Yahweh is completely justified in not going with Israel any more. On the other hand, if Yahweh does *not* go with Israel, they have lost the one thing they absolutely must have: the presence of Yahweh. Verse 16 powerful and moving. We should all take this to heart:

*“How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”* How will we know that Yahweh is pleased with us, unless he goes with us? What else distinguishes us from all the other people on the face of the earth? Wow.

<sup>17</sup> *And Yahweh said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”* God loved Moses for what Moses had just done. “I will do what you asked, I am pleased with you.” Verse 18 *Moses said, Now show me your glory.*

Yahweh agreed to be present with his people. They committed a great sin. Yahweh was angry enough to destroy them, but he relented. Then Yahweh said he would get them into the promised land but not travel with them, and then he relented on that, too. He would live among them.

Now Yahweh will show Moses his glory. What Yahweh actually does is proclaim his name. We will now find out something new about God’s name.

## **5 Yahweh Reveals his Glory and Proclaims his Name – Exodus 34:5–9**

<sup>5</sup> *Then Yahweh came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, Yahweh.* <sup>6</sup> *And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “Yahweh, Yahweh, I AM, I AM, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,* <sup>7</sup> *maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”*

<sup>8</sup> *Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.* <sup>9</sup> *“Lord,” he said, “if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.”*

In the first half of Exodus, we find out what Yahweh’s name means when his people are oppressed by enemies. We saw this in the plagues, and the Red Sea rescue, and the destruction of Egypt’s armies in the sea. That’s what Yahweh means when his people have enemies.

In the second half of Exodus, we find out what Yahweh means when his people sin and break covenant with him. What does his name mean? Here are the key lines:

*“Yahweh, Yahweh, I AM, and this is what I AM: the compassionate and gracious God. Slow to anger. Abounding in love and faithfulness. Maintaining love to thousands. Forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”*

In other parts of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, the Bible writers tell us that God is like this. This in Exodus 34 is the one place, early in the Old Testament story, where Yahweh himself tells he's like this. Here, we get it directly from God, in his own words. The other writers say he is gracious and compassionate because first Yahweh himself said it here, to Moses. We do not wait until the New Testament to meet this God. We meet him in the golden calf story.

*Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.* The basic point: let us never decide that sin does not matter. Sin matters. Yahweh is slow to anger, because he's giving us time to turn away. But it matters. He's so slow to anger, and so gracious and compassionate, that we can get fooled into thinking rebellion does not matter. It matters.

The third and fourth generation part is not clear. Here's the best I've heard. If the parents sin, but the children turn away from that sin, God will not punish. He's slow to anger. But if the third and fourth generation of children are still sinning as the first generation, then there will be consequences. But: God never punishes righteous children for the sins of their parents.

In the New Testament, God rarely punishes believers for their sins, but it does happen a few times (Acts 5:1–10; 1 Corinthians 11:30–31; Revelation 2:22–23). This explanation of Yahweh's name still stands, people. This is our God, and we must take him as he is.

The emphasis is on Yahweh being unbelievably compassionate and gracious and forgiving. There were some consequences for Israel for worshipping the golden calf, there was some punishment, but basically the nation got through this unscathed. We don't read about anything happening to Aaron. God forgave these people and carried on with them because that's what Yahweh is like. That's what his name means.

Moses responds in verses 8–9. *Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. “Lord,” he said, “if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.”*

Moses bowed to the ground and worshipped. What else could he do. And then Moses asks for what he has already received. Moses does not use Yahweh's name in this request, he uses *Adonai*, which means “Lord” or “Master.” Having just heard Yahweh proclaim his own name like this, Moses does not feel worthy to say that name. So he says *Adonai*.

Then he asks three things. (1) *“Let the Lord go with us.”* That's been the whole conversation, and God has already agreed to go with Israel. Moses wants to make sure. *Let the Lord go with us.*

(2) *Forgive our wickedness and our sin.* Yahweh has already said that he forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin. That's what his name means. Moses wants to make sure.

(3) *And take us as your inheritance.* Yahweh had not said that. That's a new one, and startling. Take us as your inheritance.

When Yahweh first offered covenant to Israel, he said "of all the nations you will be my treasured possession." When Moses says, "take us as your inheritance," he's saying the same thing as "treasured possession," just using different words. Moses wants full and complete restoration of Israel in God's affections. Take us as your inheritance, take us as your treasured possession, keep us as the apple of your eye.

Here's the thing, people. When we sin and rebel against God, often there are no consequences. Even when there are consequences, either way, God does not hold us apart afterward. He brings us back as close to him as before we sinned, we are as dear to him after we sinned as before. Israel was still his treasured possession. He still took Israel as his inheritance. That's grace, that's love, that's forgiveness. This was all firm in the Bible by the end of Exodus.

Summary: In the first half of Exodus, we find out what Yahweh's name means when his people are oppressed by enemies. We saw this in the plagues and what happened to Egypt. In the second half of Exodus, particularly the golden calf story, we find out what Yahweh means when his people sin and break covenant with him.

## **6 Christ Our Intercessor – Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:24–25**

Moses was impressive in his prayers for Israel, was his not? That's what it means to intercede for someone. Moses interceded for Israel, and it was a good thing he did.

Christ himself does the very same thing for us, all the time. *Who will condemn us? No one. Why? Because Christ Jesus who died—more than that, was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us.* Christ is at God's right hand, doing for us what Moses did for Israel.

*Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* Jesus, the eternal high priest, lives forever, is always praying for us the way Moses prayed for Israel. That's a big comfort, is it not? We have a great God and a great salvation. Amen.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, if your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with us, your people, unless you go with us. What else will distinguish us, your people, from all the other people on the face of the earth? Thank you that because of your Son Jesus, you do live among us in just this way. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.