

Exodus 31:18–32:8

Introduction

This morning, we come to the part in the middle. Chapters 25-31 of Exodus have all been taken up with “the plans of the tabernacle described in detail.” Then, chapters 35-39 are all taken up with a report of how “the plans for the tabernacle are all followed exactly. So, there’s a lot of word for word, exact repetition in these two sections. They very clearly, very obviously, go *together*. But in between, we have an interlude of three full chapters. It’s the part in the middle.

But before we start with chapter thirty-two, let’s look at the very last verse of chapter thirty-one.

I. Exodus 31:18 — And [the LORD] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

It was all the way back in chapter twenty that God spoke the Ten Words (the Ten Commandments) from out of the midst of the fire and the smoke on Mount Sinai. Then, after giving His people many righteous rules and judgments that modeled how these commandments were to be applied and lived out in the community, we read in chapter twenty-four:

- Exodus 24:12 — The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

In the end, Moses spends forty days and forty nights on the mountain (cf. Exod. 24:18), but until now the “only” thing he’s received in this long period of time are the instructions for making a tabernacle – a sanctuary where the holy God can live with and among His people as family. Only *now, after* all these detailed instructions for the tabernacle, are we told that Moses finally receives what we assume he’s been waiting for all along. “[the LORD] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.”

It may be helpful to divide Exodus into four parts, but, of course, we have to see that they’re all tightly bound together as one. We have to see the tabernacle always in the light of the covenant – which is summed up in the Ten Commandments. The Tabernacle is “simply” the place where the Covenant God (Yahweh) can live in fellowship with His covenant people (Israel). The tabernacle is the place where a repentant and an obedient covenant people can come to worship and enjoy their Covenant God. In other words, the tabernacle can only make sense in the light of the Ten Commandments and God’s covenant with His people.

But now that we’ve been reminded of the covenant and the Ten Commandments, this, in turn, reminds us of something else. It reminds us of God’s redemption and deliverance of His people from the land of Egypt. Remember how the Ten Commandments are grounded and rooted in this very reality:

- Exodus 20:1–3 — God spoke all these words [of the covenant], saying, “**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.** You shall have no other gods before me...”

Once again, see how all the different parts of Exodus are tightly bound together as one! The Ten Commandments, as an expression of God’s covenant, can only be truly understood in light of Israel’s redemption and deliverance from the house of slavery.

So, this short little verse at the end of chapter thirty-one is really a **summary** of **all** the mercy and grace and goodness of God – the God who **redeemed** His people from Egypt (Part I) and led them safely through the desert (Part II) so that He might enter into **covenant** relationship with them (Part III), so that He might **live with them and among them** as family. (Part IV) *All of this* is summed up in these few words: “[the LORD] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” What a precious gift. What an awesome God.

And now we come to the part in the middle – to the first verses of chapter thirty-two.

II. Exodus 32:1 — When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together against* Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. 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.”

We’re left stunned and dizzied. Reeling. We try to collect our thoughts – to fathom and comprehend what’s happening. The reality is that what they’re doing is beyond bad. It’s the very **worst** thing that could possibly happen. But at the same time, it’s *not* what we might think it is. The Israelites *aren’t saying* that they want to abandon the true God, Yahweh, and exchange Him for a different god. To the contrary! They would say that they’re actually concerned lest they lose the blessing and the protection of God, and of His presence with them.

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain...” Remember that from the very beginning—from day one—Moses has been God’s representative to the people, and the people’s representative before God. Moses is the man who brought the people out of Egypt and led them through the desert as God’s representative. Remember what God said to Moses in chapter three:

- Exodus 3:10 (cf. vv. 11–12) — Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”

And remember what the people said to Moses in chapter twenty:

- Exodus 20:19 — You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.

* Cf. the tone of the people’s “demand” (“up”) and the identical Hebrew in Numbers 16:3, 42; 20:2

But now Moses has been gone for over a month, and the people are beginning to feel afraid. As the leader and shepherd of the people and the mediator between themselves and God, Moses has become a visible symbol of Yahweh's presence with them—to lead them and protect them, and go before them through the desert. So what does it mean when Moses disappears for going on, now, a month and a half? The people are feeling vulnerable, and exposed, and abandoned in the middle of the desert. How can they be convinced again of the presence of Yahweh to lead them and to protect them and to go before them?

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together against Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. 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.”

The people are frustrated. What good is Moses if he's disappeared? What good is Moses if we have no idea what's become of him? The one who brought us up out of the land of Egypt as God's representative is no longer with us, so then “make us gods **who shall go before us**” – make us gods who shall take the place of Moses, assuring us that Yahweh is truly present among us. This may sound strange to us (much like the various pieces of furniture in the tabernacle can sound strange to us), but if we had lived in the days of Israel, it would have been the most “natural” thing in the world. It was the “obvious” solution to the absence of Moses.

But, of course, underneath the apparently “noble” desire of the people to know that Yahweh is present with them, there's a problem. We see this in the fact that the people gather themselves together against Aaron. We see this in the impatient tone of their words: “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses...” And, of course, above all else we see this in the second commandment:

- Exodus 20:4–6 — “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Regardless of how natural and obvious this solution may seem to be, it has been explicitly forbidden by the clear word of God.

But what about the “noble” desire of the people? What about their desire to be convinced and assured of Yahweh's presence with them to guide and protect and to go before them?

III. Exodus 32:2–4 — So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

While Moses is at the top of the mountain receiving instructions from the Lord for a tabernacle where He will live and dwell among His people, the people are at the bottom of the mountain, inventing a **substitute** for the tabernacle. Instead of the Tabernacle and its furniture covered all in gold, it will be the calf made out of gold that represents Yahweh's presence to the people. As we read about all the people taking off the rings of gold that were in their ears and "bringing" them to Aaron so he can "receive" the gold from their hand, we're reminded of what the Lord has said to Moses on the mountain:

- Exodus 25:1–3 — Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall **receive** the contribution for me. And this is the contribution that you shall **receive** from them: gold, silver, and bronze...

And then there's the fulfillment of this command in chapter thirty-five:

- Exodus 35:20–22 — Then all the congregation of the people of Israel... **brought** the LORD's contribution to be used for the tent of meeting... All who were of a willing heart **brought** brooches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects, every man dedicating an offering of gold to the LORD.

So, here in chapter thirty-two, this willing donation for the golden calf is meant to be seen in light of the very different willing donation that God has desired for His sanctuary. When we read that Aaron fashioned the gold with a graving tool, this calls to mind what the Lord said to Moses about Bezalel:

- Exodus 31:1–5 — I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft.

The craftsmanship of Aaron in fashioning the golden calf is meant to be seen in light of the very different craftsmanship of Bezalel in making the tabernacle with all its furniture. When the people say of the golden calf, and the One that this calf is intended to represent: "These are **your gods**, O Israel, **who brought you up out of the land of Egypt**," how can we not be reminded of God's word in Exodus chapter twenty:

- Exodus 20:1–2 — I am the LORD **your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt**...

The people are purposefully quoting the very words of God. They're not denying that Yahweh is the God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, they're simply identifying the presence of this God, Yahweh, with the golden calf that they have made. (cf. 1 Kings 12:28)

And so, while Moses is at the top of the mountain receiving instructions from the Lord for a tabernacle where there is to be no physical representation of Himself, the people are at the bottom of the mountain, inventing a substitute for the tabernacle – a physical symbol of Yahweh **present** with His people.

IV. Exodus 32:5–6 — When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

It’s numbing. There’s so much about this that can appear to look right, and yet underneath, we know that everything about it is all wrong. When Aaron sees the people’s association of this golden calf with Yahweh, the one who had brought them out from the land of Egypt, what does he do? He builds an altar before it and proclaims that the very next day will be a feast to the LORD (Yahweh). How can we not be reminded of the purpose for which God brought Israel out of Egypt:

- Exodus 10:9 (cf. Exod. 12:14; 13:6; 23:15-16, 18) — Moses said [to Pharaoh], “We will go with our young and our old. We will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, for we must hold a **feast to the LORD.**”

When Aaron builds an altar and offers up burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord before the golden calf, how can we not be reminded of the Lord’s words in chapter twenty:

- Exodus 20:24 — **An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings**, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

The people want the blessing of the Lord – or at least they think they do. But is this really the place where God will cause His name to be remembered? The people have completely failed to even ask the question – because they think that God will be present where, and when, and how they want Him to be present. The people “rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings.” The language, here, is intended to remind us of what happened not so very long ago in Exodus twenty-four:

- Exodus 24:4–5 — [Moses] **rose early in the morning** and **built an altar** at the foot of the mountain... And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who **offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings.**

When we read here in Exodus 32 that “the people sat down to eat and drink,” we’re reminded again of Exodus twenty-four:

- Exodus 24:9–11 — Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel... they beheld God, and **ate and drank.**

With Moses gone, and with no sign of when he might ever come back, the people are intent on assuring themselves of Yahweh’s presence with them. So they build an altar before the golden calf; they proclaim a feast “to the Lord”; they rise up early in the morning and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings, and they sit down to eat and drink “before the Lord.” How can we not see in these things a “copy” of the beautiful, wonderful covenant ceremony in chapter twenty-four?

And *then*... they “rose up to play.” The point here seems to be partying, and carousing, and reveling. Verse twenty-five says that the people had “broken loose” – they had cast off all restraint. The reason we fashion idols, whether physical or mental, is so that we can make God more manageable – so we can assure ourselves of His presence and blessing while at the same time being free to live, more or less, how we want to live. And so, for all the similarities and likenesses between this counterfeit religion and the true worship of Yahweh, there is this glaring **difference**. Here, in chapter thirty-two, the people are a law to themselves, and so after sitting down to eat and drink, they rise up to “play.” But back in chapter twenty-four, we have a very, *very* different scene:

- Exodus 24:3–8 — Moses came and told the people **all the words of the LORD and all the rules**. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “**All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.**” And Moses **wrote down all the words of the LORD**... Then he took **the Book of the Covenant** and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “**All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.**” And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all **these words.**”

Could there possibly be two pictures, or two scenes more contrary to each other – more diametrically opposed to each other? And yet the horrible irony is that what makes them so contrary to each other is the fact of their “similarity.” The golden calf religion is purposefully patterned after the true worship of Yahweh. The golden calf religion is actually an expression of the people’s desire to have Yahweh close at hand – to protect, and to lead, and to bless. Later on, in verse 18, Moses will say to Joshua that he hears the sound of **singing** in the camp. The only other place that this word is used in Exodus is when the people sing after the crossing of the Red Sea.

- Exodus 15:21 — Miriam **sang** to them: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.”

What makes the singing and celebrating of Israel around the golden calf so perverse is that it’s the twisted distortion of the song that they had sung only a few months before on the shores of the Red Sea. And so the golden calf is more than just a false religion. It’s an attempted *copy* of the true religion, and, therefore, it’s the **ultimate perversion**. As we’ll see over the coming weeks, this is nothing less than the reversal and the undoing of the last thirty-one chapters in Exodus – of the **tabernacle**, of the **covenant**, and even of Israel’s **redemption** from Egypt. Two weeks ago, we saw that Exodus is all about a new creation. But here in chapter thirty-two, it’s all about to go up in smoke. And, *why*? We read in verses 7-8:

V. Exodus 32:7–8 — And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have **acted corruptly [ruinously]**. They have **turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them**. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”

Conclusion

What on earth are we to say to all this? How are we to process what's happening? It's dizzying, it's numbing, it's horrifying; and yet, to the people, it all makes "perfect sense." That's the scary thing. The scary thing is that this actually happened. And, quite honestly, that ought to leave us reeling.

The people would have said that their goal was to assure themselves of Yahweh's presence – of His protection and blessing. But the actual, horrible reality is described by the Psalmist in Psalm 106:

- Psalm 106:19–23 — They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

The people have acted corruptly. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that God had commanded them. While Moses is at the top of the mountain receiving instructions from the Lord for a sanctuary where He will live and dwell among His people, the people are at the bottom of the mountain, inventing a substitute for that sanctuary. Even as the Lord is giving to Moses the precious gift of "the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God," (31:18) the people are at the bottom of the mountain breaking the covenant. No sooner has Yahweh taken Israel to be His wife by covenant than we find Israel committing adultery on the very day of her wedding. (cf. Moberly; quoted in Hamilton) If the last thirty-one chapters have been all about a new creation, then chapter thirty-two is the equivalent of the fall all over again. (cf. Fretheim; quoted in Hamilton)

It simply takes our breath away. And in the end, it leaves **us** not just at the end of our rope, but rather with no lifeline at all. What if Exodus were to end here? How many places in Scripture could we ask ourselves a similar question? The sinful nature within these Israelites is the same sinful nature that's within each and every single one of us. Let that truly sink in. If we're astonished at the scene in Exodus chapter thirty-two, may it never be because we think we are different from them. These verses are very simply a commentary on the fallen, sinful human nature that's common to us all. "O God, be merciful to me! I am a sinner through and through."

- Romans 3:10–12 — As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

Certainly, there would have been some Israelites, perhaps even many Israelites, who would have said that they were seeking for God. But they were seeking for a God refashioned, reshaped, and reimagined according to their own desires. Because of our sinful, human nature, there is not a one of us who will ever seek for God **as He really is** without Him first choosing us in Christ and calling us by grace.

Are we seeking for a god that we have refashioned, reshaped, and reimagined according to our own desires – a god who will still allow us, at some level, to think, and do, and live how we want? Are we seeking a god who will be present with us and go before us, but who doesn't require our radical, absolute, obedience to His holy will revealed in His word? Or are we seeking the one true God who comes to live with us and among us and who commands us to love Him with all of our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, and to love our neighbor as our self? If this latter option is true of us, then let us fix it firmly in our minds and hearts that this can only be because He first chose us in Christ and called us by His grace. If this is true of us, then let us fall down on our faces before His mercy. If this is true of us, then let us continue to immerse ourselves in all of His Word so that we might know His will and *always* do the things that are **pleasing** to Him.

I want to remember and fix it firmly in my mind that if God had not first chosen me and called me by His grace, *I* would still be blindly fashioning idols and running after false gods. Here is the **ground** for all *true humility*. And here is the **ground** for all true *obedience and righteousness*.

- 1 John 5:18–21 — We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.