

## Studies in Exodus No. 37

### Exodus 32:1-14

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We said, back at 24:11, at the conclusion of the covenant renewal ceremony narrated in the first 11 verses of chapter 24, that apart from one major exception the book of Exodus ended there. The division of the Pentateuch into five books has more to do – especially in the case of the first four books – with how much text can be put on a single scroll, rather than with thematic considerations. The long chapters of regulations regarding the manufacture of the tabernacle and its furniture that followed 24:11, if their theme is taken into account, really belong more with Leviticus than Exodus. Exodus, up to that point, had been an historical narrative but at 24:12 it became a manual of worship. True enough, those regulations were what God gave to Moses while upon the top of Mt. Sinai, and, in that respect, fit properly into the narrative at that point. But, of course, the regulations regarding sacrifices with which Leviticus begins were also given by God to Moses on the mountain. If we are to divide the material *thematically* most of Exodus after 24:11 belongs with Leviticus. However, as I said, there is one major exception, and that is chapters 32-34 which return to narrative. Indeed, they are the one remaining section of narrative in the book. These chapters are a narrative of events that occurred while and immediately after Moses was with God on the top of Mt. Sinai receiving the Law.

### Text Comment

- v.1 Moses has been gone by this time almost 40 days. The top of the mountain had all the while been alive with lightning and thunder. It was easy for the people to think that he was dead. Israel explicitly asks for “gods.” Yahweh seems to have disappeared with Moses. They needed new gods to help them.

We ask in one of our morning confessions that the Lord would forgive us for the “pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives.” Here it was impatience that undid Israel. They weren’t willing to wait for the Lord’s will to unfold, no matter that Moses had told them to wait for his return. No doubt they were also afraid, as the “who will go before us” indicates. They were facing the prospect of being stranded in the wilderness with no one to lead them. [Alter, 493]

- v.2 Some have suggested that the narrative can be taken to suggest that Aaron was stalling, hoping either that the people’s eagerness to have an idol would dissipate through the delay required to gather the gold or that they would lose interest when they realized how much such an idol would cost.

Later Israel would impose a taboo on gold jewelry because of the sin she committed here. Before this she wore gold jewelry. Gold jewelry for men and women is mentioned in Genesis and earlier in Exodus. But, as 33:4-6 suggests, after this there was a taboo against such jewelry. That taboo seems to lie behind Gideon’s conduct as described in Judges 8:24.

- v.4 The NIV translates “calf,” perhaps primarily because we are so used to hearing of the “golden calf.” The English word “calf” suggests a gamboling little animal, but the Hebrew term actually refers to a young bull that has reached adult size, a bull in the full vigor of its youth. In Gen. 15:19 the word is used to describe a three-year-old animal. And in Ps. 106:20 – which is a retelling of this same history – the NIV renders the same word simply as “bull.” A calf, as we picture such an animal, would not be a normal image in ancient idolatry. [Cassuto, 412; Ellison, 169]

The text suggests that the idol was first rough cast in solid gold and then finished with a tool.

“These are your gods...” raises a question. The word *אֱלֹהִים*, “God,” can be translated, as it always is in reference to Yahweh, in the singular. But then a singular verb is used even though the form of the noun is plural. When that happens, as it does thousands of times in the OT, it is an instance of what is usually called the “plural of majesty.” [Cf. Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 7.4.3.b] But here we have a plural verb with *elohim* which makes it necessary to translate the noun “gods” not “God.” But Israel here made only one idol, one golden bull. Why, then, “gods?” Certainly it is a parody of 20:2 – “you shall have no other gods before me” – and perhaps that explains the plural. We have the same singular idol and plural “gods” in v. 8. Or perhaps there are thought to be more than one god represented by the single idol.

- v.5 Aaron makes matters still worse by building an altar. Israel had as yet no altar. The one described in chapter 27 had not yet been built. So Aaron is taking in hand to develop an entire cult without divine guidance, indeed, in direct violation of God’s law. He is going to worship Yahweh in precisely that way Israel has been forbidden to use.

“...to the Lord,” that is, “to Yahweh,” suggests that, whatever the people were thinking by asking for “gods,” Aaron himself was not intending to exchange the worship of Yahweh for the worship of some other god. He meant merely to worship Yahweh in a more accessible way, in that way common to the peoples of that time and place. Israel didn’t want to be different from the peoples around her; she wanted to be the same. Just as later she would want a visible rather than an invisible king; now she wants a visible god to worship. The bull was to serve as a sign of Yahweh’s presence, perhaps as the throne on which he sat. A bull was often in ANE worship a cultic seat for a god. The god was thought to sit on it. So the bull was not thought to be the god himself, but was, as his throne or seat, a visible representation of the god. That, anyway, seems to have been Aaron’s thought; the people went further.

- v.6 The NIV’s “revelry,” is a word that suggests in such a context a drunken orgy, which, after all, was the sort of thing closely associated with ANE worship, especially that worship featuring bulls. Such behavior would have been understood in religious terms by the people – it was part of fertility worship – but God was holy and had expressed in the Ten Commandments the implications of his holiness for worship. It is the divine holiness that explains the severe reaction that follows.

- v.7 In a statement thick with sarcasm, the Lord refers to Israel as *Moses' people* whom *Moses* had brought out of Egypt. The Lord is, as it were, disavowing a connection to these people, like a mother in a grocery store who doesn't want to be identified as the parent of those misbehaving and whining children.
- v.9 "Stiff-necked" is a farmer's metaphor for an ox or a horse that won't respond to the rope when tugged. It means "stubborn" and "willful."
- v.10 Yahweh offered Moses the opportunity to be the one, the single one through whom the promise made to Abraham would be fulfilled. He would be, as it were, a new Abraham. Heady stuff! What is more, Moses had already learned something about the Israelites: how difficult they would prove to be, how little thanks he would receive for his leadership, and how jealous others would be of his position.
- v.13 You will notice that Moses' reply is quite different from the modern sentimentality we would be likely to hear from church leaders. He doesn't excuse their conduct or find reasons for it. He accepts the harsh judgment the Lord has made about Israel and her behavior and pleads instead God's honor and his promises.
- v.14 The NIV's *relented* is literally "repented" (סָחַח). It is an anthropomorphism – the action of God described in human terms – but is very important and meaningful. It does not mean that God changed his mind, in the sense that we do, of course, in the sense that he came to believe that what he had formerly planned to do would be a mistake. "It means, in biblical language, that he now embarked on a different course of action from that already suggested as a possibility, owing to some new factor which is usually mentioned in the context. In the Bible, it is clear that God's promises and warnings are always conditioned on man's response: this is most clearly set out in Ezekiel 33:13-16," but is made clear in many texts (e.g. Isa. 38:1-6). In other words, in biblical parlance genuinely conditional promises and intentions are often stated in absolute terms. So, Moses didn't *alter* God's purpose; he carried it out. He was Godlike himself in sharing God's mind and God's purpose. [Cole, 217]

We have a commentary on this history in Psalm 106. In vv. 19-21 we read:

At Horeb they made a calf and worshipped an idol cast from metal.  
They exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull, which eats grass.  
They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt.

The Psalmist sums up the incident of the golden calf by saying that Israel exchanged the Living God – their Glory, the manifestation of whose glory was still visible to them on the top of the Mountain – for an idol, a common ANE idol, a mere man-made statue. And they did that because they forgot the Lord, Yahweh, and forgot his salvation.

We'll look more closely at the anatomy of Israel's sin next time. Tonight I want to consider it as an instance of Israel's unbelief. It is unbelief, after all. It is not first disobedience; it is first unbelief. The particular sin that Israel committed is the sin that all unbelievers commit. They

worship the creature rather than the Creator, as Paul puts it in Romans 1. But that worship stems from unbelief.

It is a point of great importance as is proved by the fact that it is mentioned so often in the Bible. Israel in the wilderness – no matter the ten plagues, no matter the crossing of the Sea of Reeds on dry land, no matter the manna, no matter the appearance of the glory of Yahweh to them at Sinai – Israel in the wilderness was an unbelieving, a faithless people. Yahweh, no matter all that he had done and said, was little more than an idea that passed quickly through the transoms of their minds. And the Lord can do the most spectacular things *and they will have no effect if people don't have faith.*

Here, in our narrative, that point is underscored *and in an emphatic way* already in v. 1 by the total absence of Yahweh in the people's speech. They speak as if *Moses* brought Israel out of Egypt on eagles' wings. They speak as if Moses' absence is the thing they ought to worry about. And then, to make it worse, Israel says in v. 4, standing before the idol of the bull that Aaron had made, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Where is the Lord in their minds? What of him? *Nothing!* The entire book has been a powerful study in the presence of the Lord and Israel seems to have no sense whatsoever of his presence. He has disappeared from their view as if he never were. We are nonplussed and wonder how this can be; but, the fact is, it happens all the time.

I remember being struck by this when, in seminary, I had my first EE experience. Some of you are familiar with *Evangelism Explosion*, the witnessing technique developed by D. James Kennedy of our Coral Ridge PCA church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The trainee is taught to begin by asking certain questions of the people one is calling on and talking to. In my experience, most of the people I called on in suburban St. Louis, claimed to be Christians of one stripe or another. Sometimes they would even give quite decisive confessions of faith in Christ as the Son of God. But when they were asked:

"If you were to die tonight and you were to stand before Christ and he were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say? they almost invariably gave the same answer. "I've been a good person; I've tried to live an honorable life; I've never killed anybody; I've taught my children to be good people; I've met my obligations; and so on."

Here are people who say they believe in Jesus Christ, even people who say that he is the Son of God. But when it comes time to confess their faith, they don't mention him at all. His life and work, his death on the cross don't feature in any serious way in their understanding of their lives. We ask: how can this be? How can someone know to say that Christ is the Son of God and then answer a question about salvation and not mention him at all? It seems absurdly illogical, unreasonable, and incongruous. But, fact is, this is always and everywhere the nature of the unbelieving heart. The impression that God leaves on the heart and mind is so shallow, so weak, that it vanishes like the mist in the heat of the sun. Any little thing puts God and Christ right out of mind. Moses' 40 day absence is enough to make them forget the plagues, the parting of the Sea, the manna, even the pyrotechnics going on at that moment at the top of the mountain.

Unbelief is a principle that dominates the mind. It crowds out the truth that cannot be seen. It hardens the soul so that it will not receive an impression from the glory of the Lord. What Israel did at the foot of Mt. Sinai is only a striking example of what the scientist does who studies the incredible complexities and perfections of nature and thinks about all of it without even a passing thought of God, the Creator, whose fingerprints are everywhere he looks. You know the famous story about the man who is certain that he is dead. He is sent to a psychiatrist but to no avail. No matter how much evidence the psychiatrist piles up, the man will not believe that he is alive. Finally, the psychiatrist hits on an idea. He sets the man to studying the circulatory system and what happens at death. He pounds these facts into the man's head until his patient accepts without reservation the fact that dead men do not bleed. He gets the man to admit to him that dead men do not bleed and then, in a flash, takes out a pin and pricks the man in the arm. As the blood wells up on the man's arm, his face goes white and he whispers, "Dead men bleed after all!"

Well, this is just like that. The preposterousness of standing at the foot of a mountain alive with thunder and lightning, a mountain far removed from Egypt to which they had been carried, as it were on eagles' wings, through the parted waters of the Sea of Reeds, having eaten that morning food miraculously appearing on the ground, I say, the preposterousness of planning to use gold the Egyptians willingly gave them the night of the tenth plague – because they were terrorized by Yahweh's wrath – to make an idol to some other god than Yahweh, never occurred to them. Without faith they were locked in a dream world and could not tell.

Do you children remember the Narnia story *The Silver Chair*? In Lewis' *The Silver Chair*, the beautiful witch/queen of the Underworld nearly convinces the children from the Overworld that her own rather dismal kingdom is the only reality and theirs but an imagined dream. The children feel vaguely that there is something of great importance they must remember but can't quite recollect what. Indeed there is. They have been sent on a mission by Aslan, the great King of Narnia. But, at the moment, all they can think of is the *thrum-thrum-thrum* of the Queen's mandolin and her lulling voice. "The sun? There is no sun. You have seen my lamps and imagined that there was a sun."

To prevent the enchantment of the children the Marsh-wiggle, their simple but sound-thinking companion, reminds them that if the Queen's Underworld is the real world and the only world, it's a pretty dismal world; indeed, if, as she says, Aslan and Narnia are only a dream, well that dream is better than her reality. At that point the children, who were sinking under the spell of the Queen's words, rally to the Marsh-wiggle's words and make their escape. Faith can tell a good story from a bad one; truth from fiction. [In Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 122, 142-143] But the Israelites never woke up. No Marsh-wiggle brought them to their senses. They fell under the Witch/Queen's spell.

Or, put the irrationality of unbelief in a more adult way. Unbelief leads a person to rail against the God who isn't there for having created such an unjust world or even to rail against God for not existing! It is as preposterous as John Stuart Mill, the English philosopher, expressing his religious skepticism this way:

“I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures, and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.” [Cited in A. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 107]

One could call such a statement simply empty literary flourish – after all, the one who doesn’t believe in the existence of a just and holy God need hardly worry about *that non-existent God* sending him to hell – but, in fact, it is the kind of utterly inconsistent and incongruous things unbelievers say all the time. It is at one and the same time a confession of God and a denial of his existence; a denial of divine justice and a solemn complaint against divine justice at the same time. It is a statement about God in the form of a denial of everything we know about God. It is Israel saying that she had been delivered from Egypt and, in the same breath, looking for some gods to credit with the achievement! It is sports announcers talking about being thankful on Thanksgiving Day with seemingly no awareness that thanksgiving requires there to be someone to whom we owe the blessings of our lives. Looking straight at the top of the mountain, alit with lightning and loud with thunder, Israel said, “Let’s make a bull and find some other gods to worship.” For reasons that seemed entirely sufficient to her – indeed, for reasons upon which probably she never seriously reflected – she warmly, seriously, intentionally confessed her faith in other gods – gods just like the Egyptians had – and forgot all about Yahweh who had rendered the Egyptian gods nothing but bad jokes. She found herself in the wilderness needing guidance and forgot all about how she got there. It is this inability to reckon with reality, this tendency to deny it at the very moment one is confessing it that explains why the Bible is never tolerant of unbelief. All unbelief is in various ways the defiance of the obvious.

But its power no one can deny. Unbelief is a force sufficient to deafen Israel’s ears to the thunder, to blind her eyes to lightening, to wipe her mind clear of the memories of past days and months and the astonishing things that had happened. Her religious impulse, expressed in her interest in finding new gods, was, in fact, not *faith seeking understanding but unbelief seeking satisfaction apart from Yahweh*. In modern life and in so much speaking about God and religion, *faith* is regarded as a thing that everyone shares – the question is: faith in what? Everyone has faith, but they place their faith in different things. That is the common view.

And, of course, there is a sense in which that is true. Everyone must believe certain things to be true because so much of human life and thought depends upon what cannot be seen or demonstrated in a laboratory.

But there is, at the same time, a fundamental biblical perspective according to which everyone is either a believer or an *unbeliever*. One has faith or not. That is the only alternative. It is another way of saying that there is one God and one truth, and so there can be only one faith. Israel had so many privileges, but she did not have faith. Her religious conceptions were not the expression of faith but of unbelief. Listen to this from the late Dr. Edmund Clowney.

“Most people think of religions as man’s quest for God. In reality, religions provide ways of escape from God. He may be promoted to a high God, that tribal religion can worship spirits of trees or of leopards. He may be screened off by a ceiling of laws and ordinances so the self-righteous can earn heaven on points. God may be dissolved in the yin and yang of natural forces so that we are no longer accountable to him personally. Or

he may be reduced to the divine in everything, the god-in-us of New Age spirituality.  
 [Preaching Christ in all the Scriptures, 80]

The God of the Bible, however, the true and living God, is not one from whom men can escape. He cannot be defined out of meaningful existence. He is there! Always there! He has left the stamp of his existence on our very natures. And his will comes to pass. Israel may reject him, but, as we will see as the chapter continues and the account unfolds, she cannot escape him. She must answer for her rebellion. She will be punished severely for it.

In the NT this is over and over again the judgment made about the world that does not embrace the Gospel – it has no faith – and it is the judgment made about those in the church who do not genuinely and sincerely trust and obey the Lord. They are *unbelievers*. In the Bible, to say that someone does not have faith is the same thing as saying that they do not know God. That was Israel's problem. They had seen Yahweh at work but they did not *know* him.

So the author of Hebrews tells us, speaking about Israel in the wilderness,

“For we also have had the gospel preached to us just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard it did not combine it with faith.”

And Paul says the same thing in several different places: that this generation of Israel was an unbelieving people. He writes in 1 Cor. 10:

“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”

What Paul means is, of course, that Israel, for all her privileges, lacked faith in Christ. She saw Christ, but she didn't believe in him. And that made all the difference in the world. It made the difference between God's acceptance and his wrath, between Israel's triumph in the Promised Land and her perishing in the wilderness.

Now what is so important about all of this is the dramatic consequences of the presence or absence of faith. Israel didn't have it and easily slipped into the worship of idols *even after all the Lord had done for her; even after all she had herself experienced of God's love and power*. There was no faith to arrest her apostasy, her rebellion against God, her defiance of his will, her betrayal of his grace and goodness to her. Aaron, strangely enough, *had the very faith that Israel did not*. He didn't act like it; he adorned his faith very poorly. He succumbed to temptation in a despicable way. *But he never lost sight of Yahweh*. He never lost the conviction in his heart that Yahweh was the true God and the savior of his people. He never rejected the Lord. He thought he could let Israel worship the true God in the same way idolaters worshipped their so-called

gods, but it was Yahweh, the Lord, he wanted them to worship. And because of that, though his work was burned up, as we shall see, he was himself saved, though as by fire.

Aaron and Israel in this scene are like the molecules of water perched at the very tip of the continental divide. They stand right next to one another; perhaps they even touch one another; but one falls away to the East and one to the West; one goes to the Atlantic and one to the Pacific. They are so close at the beginning of their journey, but so far apart at the end. The difference in the life of men is like that. Men's conduct may seem not so very different, but one man falls to the side of faith and the other to the side of unbelief and they end up, inevitably, a universe apart from one another.

We wish, of course – you and I wish – that our faith were always producing its proper effects. Years ago in Scotland there was a famous young football star named Tommy Walker. He was a Christian and an outspoken Christian. A certain well-known football referee was writing about his experiences in a series of articles in a Scottish newspaper. In one of them he mentioned Tommy Walker and said, “When I'm refereeing a match in which Tommy Walker is playing, I know that I have only twenty one players to watch, because Tommy would never do a dirty thing.” [In William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography*, 95] Well, that is the kind of difference faith makes. But, alas it doesn't always make such a difference, in Tommy Walker's life or in Aaron's. But finally it does and it makes all the difference in the world.

Aaron had faith; Israel did not and that single difference made all the difference. Aaron looked for a moment as if he were with Israel in her unbelief; but he was not. “Faith,” the Puritan Thomas Watson said, “is the master-wheel; it sets all the other graces running.” [In Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 181] When faith is absent, the entire machine stops. That's what happened at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Israel turned away from God, but, at the last, Aaron pulled back.

When this episode, or Israel's entire sojourn in the wilderness, is referred to elsewhere in the Bible – in Psalm 106 or in Hebrews or in 1 or 2 Corinthians – it is always with a view to warning us of the absolute necessity of faith. See what a difference it makes when there is no faith. Don't allow yourselves to be faithless. Put your trust in the Lord *and keep it there!* And, as Paul in 1 Cor. 10 and as the author of Hebrews, “if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.”

Aaron at the last knew, knew very well, what Israel had already forgotten, that they were in the wilderness because of what Yahweh had done for them and that he had proved himself to them as the one and only God. There could be no deserting him. He stumbled in the face of temptation, but he never completely lost sight of the Lord. He had faith and it came to his rescue.

This is key and we must never forget it. We tend to worry first and most about conduct. But in conduct Aaron and the Israelites were not *that* different. The crucial issue is faith. We should always be most concerned about faith, about our faith, about the faith of our children, our friends. If there is faith it will eventually tell on the conduct. If there is no faith, no amount of right conduct will help. We must pray for nothing so much as true and living faith. We must come to worship with a view to feeding and nourishing our faith. We must examine ourselves, as Paul

said, to see if we are in the faith. And we must practice our faith. We must put our faith into action and teach our children to do the same. If we have living faith everything else will come to us; everything else will fall into place. Without faith we can do everything else and it won't amount to anything. Keep your eyes fixed on Yahweh. That is the secret to everything!