

Ministry of Grace Church

Exodus 32 – Speaker Notes

Beginning in **Exodus 25:1** and continuing through the end of chapter 31, God revealed to Moses some of the religious ordinances for the Israelites, including the setting-up of the tabernacle, all its furniture and utensils, and the clothing for the priests. Chapter 32 resumes the narrative of the experiences of the Children of Israel. It is here that we will take up our study.

If you recall, in chapter 20 Moses had gathered all the children of Israel to the base of Mt. Sinai. While they were there, *Yahweh* descended on the mountain in a cloud and spoke directly to the people. He announced the Ten Commandments for the children of Israel. However, hearing *Yahweh* speak directly to them so scared the Israelites that they told Moses they wanted him to talk to *Yahweh* and relay the information on to them.

God, then, called Moses back up the mountain so that He could describe the tabernacle and the priestly garments to him. *Yahweh* also engraved the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets for Moses to take back down to the children of Israel. But Moses did not go back up the mountain alone. He took Joshua with him. Moses and Joshua were up on the mountain for 40 days, during which time the Israelites became restless.

Exodus 32:1

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to 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 children of Israel had seen the mighty works of *Yahweh* and had just agreed to a covenant relationship with Him in which they committed to obey Him and follow His commands. But, it has been nearly forty days since Moses had gone up the mountain with Joshua. They did not know if he was still alive or not. Up to this point in their travels, the Israelites had been following Moses. As slaves in Egypt they had learned to do as their slave masters told them to do. Since leaving Egypt they had done as Moses had told them to do. But, in doing so they had not developed a relationship with their God.

The children of Israel had a relationship with their leaders (Moses and Aaron) but they still did not have a relationship with their God. They looked to their leaders when they had problems instead of going directly to God. Even though the pillar of cloud had led them to Mt. Sinai, they were actually following their leader, not their God. Now that their leader appeared to be dead, instead of turning to God, they turned to his brother, Aaron.

The Israelites’ problem, like many today, was that they were unable to see God through faith. They wanted a god they could visibly see and touch. And in the absence of a god they could see and touch, they wanted a leader who could create such an image for them. All this in spite of the second commandment which they had just agreed to a mere 40 days earlier:

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!”

Here is Aaron’s first real test as a leader. Though verse one simply states that “the people gathered together to Aaron,” it is likely that their worry had been building for many days as Moses continued on Mt. Sinai and there were constant noises and rumblings coming from the fearsome mountain. Apparently, the people repeatedly came to Aaron, and he finally gave in because of their persistence. Unlike Moses, however, Aaron had not developed a deep personal relationship with *Yahweh*, otherwise he would have reprimanded them for their idolatrous request.

This image of a calf, though likely used as a representation like Egyptian idols, was to the children of Israel an image of *Yahweh*.

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.

Now that they had a physical representation of their God, Aaron led the children of Israel in a worship service with an altar for making sacrifices. There is a Jewish legend which says that Hur resisted the people in this idolatrous request and the people stoned him for it. That is why, according to the legend, Hur is not mentioned again in the narrative of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness. Aaron, on the other hand, led the people in this horrific practice. This same Aaron is the one who had been selected by *Yahweh* to be His high priest for these people, although Aaron was not yet aware of it. Surely Aaron must have felt unworthy when Moses later informed him of his exalted office in the service of *Yahweh*.

Now, without Moses’s spiritual leadership we see the people following the instincts of their sin nature. Since Moses had not yet taught them the proper way to worship *Yahweh*, the Israelites reverted to the practices of the heathen nation they had just left. And - it was customary for heathens to engage in revelry as part of their worship practices. As a result, the children of Israel, “sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” The Hebrew word translated “play” means “to laugh, play, or make sport.” The main idea of this verb is to be “joking around” and playing. Not very spiritual, is it?

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 corrupted themselves. 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!’”

Even though it was *Yahweh* who had brought the people out of Egypt, He gives credit to Moses for having been their spiritual and community leader. He refers to them as “your people” implying that it is their fleshly nature that is in control. The spiritual side of the people rightfully belonged to God, yet they had abandoned the spiritual for the fleshly.

Here is a demonstration of God’s omniscience (He is all knowing). While Moses was communing with Him on the mountain, God was still knowledgeable of the actions of the people in the camp. It has been a mere forty days since the Israelites had experienced the voice of God

declaring the commandments to them. Yet, they have already turned away from God in spirit in order to satisfy their flesh.

Exodus 32:9, 10

And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”

Yahweh referred to the Israelites as being a “stiff necked” people. The Hebrew words indicate someone whose neck is hard, or one who is obstinate, not willing to turn or bend to the way of another. It is the word used of an ox that will not yield to the yoke. This reference is all the more appropriate given that it is an image of an ox (calf) which they have attributed to their God.

Yahweh’s reaction to any sin is that of judgment of the sinners. He was so angry that He was ready to eliminate the Israelites altogether. This particular sin is not only a sin of selfishness, but also a sin of spiritual adultery against a jealous God whose very first commandment was, “**You shall have no other gods before Me**” and whose second commandment was, “**You shall not make for yourself a carved image.**” Had the Israelites wanted to intentionally anger *Yahweh*, they could not have performed a more grievous sin against Him than to create and worship Him as an idol.

Yahweh was angry with the Israelites, but he was pleased with Moses. He promised Moses that he would make a great nation of him. This appears to be a test for Moses. If he were only concerned about himself, he would have readily accepted *Yahweh’s* offer to make him the new Abraham. However, Moses’ focus was on God and His reputation rather than himself.

Exodus 32:11-14

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O 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? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Rather than think of himself, Moses was concerned for the children of Israel and for the reputation of *Yahweh*. As a true type of Christ, he interceded for God’s people. He was not only the mediator of man-to-God but of God-to-man as well. Moses had exerted great energy and resolve in teaching the Israelites and bringing them into a right relationship with *Yahweh*, for *Yahweh’s* honor and glory. He now exerts equal energy and resolve in appeasing *Yahweh’s* anger against His sinful people. As a type of Christ, he gives up his own glory and honor in order to save the people of God.

Moses’ pleading was not so much for the security of the Israelites as it was for the reputation and glory of *Yahweh*. Moses recounted the amazing deeds *Yahweh* performed and the slander against His name that might result if He were to destroy them all at this time. He also appeals to *Yahweh’s* promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, ignoring *Yahweh’s* suggestion to replace the children of Israel with the children of Moses.

And, we are told that *Yahweh* “relented.” This Hebrew word means, “to be sorry, to pity, or to regret.” God did not change His mind, he had compassion on them.

Exodus 32:15, 16

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

Having been entrusted with the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets, here referred to as the Testimony, Moses headed back down the mountain.

Exodus 32:17-20

When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” But he said, “It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.” And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

We aren’t told whether Joshua accompanied Moses while God delivered the law to him or if Joshua remained by himself part way up the mountain while Moses met with God by himself. It seems more reasonable to assume the latter. Otherwise, Joshua would have known that the sounds coming from the camp were the result of the people having turned from God to build the golden calf as Jehovah had informed Moses while at the top. And, if this was the case, then Joshua exhibited the greatest faith by remaining where he was, being all alone.

Now, even though God had already told Moses about the action of the Israelites, when he saw the golden idol, he was filled with anger. Though this anger would have been justly directed at the people for having forsaken their God, it was more likely directed at their sin and the extent of it. In a symbolic representation of the children of Israel breaking the commandments of God (especially the first two commands) in the presence of Jehovah on the mountain, Moses cast the stone tablets from his hands breaking them in the presence of the people.

At this point we need to look at the book of Deuteronomy to learn that Moses promptly fell to his knees before Jehovah and interceded on behalf of Aaron and the children of Israel:

So I took hold of the two tablets and threw them out of my two hands and broke them before your eyes. Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD to provoke him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the LORD bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the LORD listened to me that time also. And the LORD was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him. And I prayed for Aaron also at the same time. (Deuteronomy 9:17-20)

Once again, we see Moses as a type of Christ; as the only faithful follower of Jehovah. After interceding for Aaron and the people, Moses took swift and definitive action against the idol and those who worshipped it.

This golden calf was actually made out of wood that had been overlaid with gold. The burning of the calf is recounted by Moses, with a few more details, in Deuteronomy:

Then I took the sinful thing, the calf that you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small, until it was as fine as dust. And I threw the dust of it into the brook that ran down from the mountain. (Deuteronomy 9:21)

Exodus 32:21-24

And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” And Aaron said, “Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, ‘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.’ So I said to them, ‘Let any who have gold take it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

Here we see how God not only deals with sin, but with the sinners as well. Moses has destroyed the idol they were worshipping; now he must deal with the sinners. He begins with the leader of the sinners, his older brother Aaron. He addresses Aaron’s weakness as a leader and his inability to stand up to the people.

Aaron seems only concerned with his brother’s anger and not at all with *Yahweh’s*. This serves as additional evidence that Aaron was acting from his flesh instead of his spirit. And, because he was only concerned with his younger brother’s anger, we see no penitence whatsoever in Aaron even though he has just been caught in the act of spiritual harlotry!

And, not only has Aaron failed as a leader in not standing up to the people, and failed as a sinner who refuses to see his own sin, he now compounds his error by not taking responsibility for his own actions. First, he blames the people (you know these people, they’re evil).

Then, after blaming the people, Aaron steadfastly refuses to take any blame on himself. His absurd claim is that he melted the gold given by the people and, poof! “This calf came out!” Aaron’s actions and his excuse were so lacking in either honor or shame that Moses did not even respond to them!

Exodus 32:25-28

And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.’” And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell.

What does it mean that the people had “broken loose.” This comes from the Hebrew word *para*, meaning “to be let go” or “to be unbound or unrestrained.” Even after Moses had destroyed the idol, there were some who continued to “party hardy,” having continued in their actions in spite of Moses’ identification of such actions as sinful. And we see that those who clung to their sin, rather than forsaking it, were judged for it.

Upon seeing the unrestrained activities of some in the camp, Moses called for those who were committed to following God and the tribe of Levi responded. This may be because they were the tribe which Moses was from. Whatever the reason for their coming forward, the tribe of Levi was later chosen to be the priestly tribe by God. Perhaps it was because of this demonstration of a greater love for and dedication to Jehovah than all the other tribes.

The ensuing slaughter appears to have been random, though it probably was not. It is more likely that the Levites were told to kill all those who were still partying. Those who refuse to see their own sin will ultimately pay the price for such spiritual blindness. The death toll was about three thousand men.

Exodus 32:29, 30

And Moses said, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.” The next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

The reason for Moses’ instruction to the Levites is probably the idea of offering an offering to God for the taking of human life, even though they had done so at Moses’ command.

Before ascending the mountain again Moses made it crystal clear to the people that they had committed a grave sin. His intent in returning to the top of the mountain was to offer a means for God to forgive their sin.

Exodus 32:31,32

So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”

Moses’ 5th ascent of Mt. Sinai – After having dealt with the sins of the people on a physical level, Moses now climbs the mountain again to deal with the sins of the people on a spiritual level. This is the first time that Moses has ascended the mountain without specific instructions from God to do so (at least not that we are told about).

He recounts to God the nature and the details of the sin of the people. Here we have a true confession of sin. Moses makes it clear that he knows that which was done was wrong.

What does Moses mean by, “**Your book that You have written.**” This most likely is a reference to “The Book of Life.” This expression is a reference to the practice of writing the names of the townspeople in a book indicating that they are citizens of the town, with all the privileges of citizenship granted to them. The meaning of Moses’ expression is probably a reference to his forfeiting his physical life and the opportunity to enter into the Promised Land. In other words, Moses did not want to be the leader of a nation of sinners unforgiven by their God.

This is NOT a reference to the Book of Life referred to in [Revelation 20:15](#) or [Revelation 21:27](#): That book is the one that contains the names of all who have spiritual life. The book referred to in Exodus is one that contains the names of those who have physical life.

Exodus 32:33-35

But the LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.” Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

“I will blot him out of My book.” – While some have quoted this passage as proof that a Christian can lose his or her salvation, the context tells us otherwise. The discussion between Moses and God is not about righteousness or about spiritual life. God promised life (eternal, spiritual life) to those who would keep His commandments. Since none is righteous, no not one, none of the Israelites would receive eternal life through the keeping of the law. Only Christ completely fulfilled the Law and thus has eternal spiritual life. He gave up His physical life so that those who believe in Him could have eternal spiritual life. As we mentioned in the previous section, this reference here is to a book of physical life, not a book of spiritual life. And - verse thirty-five makes it clear that God followed through on his words by sending a plague to remove souls from the book of physical life via a plague.

So What?

There are several lessons that we can take away from this chapter.

Lesson 1: - We must learn to listen to God for direction or spiritual sustenance.

The Israelites had become accustomed to blind obedience to the task masters of Egypt and to Moses' God-directed leadership. They had not yet learned how to listen directly to the voice of God. In fact, they didn't want to listen to God, they wanted their leaders to listen to God and deliver God's message to them. The problem is that when the leader is not fully submitted to God, he may lead the people astray unless they learn to discern God's voice themselves.

Many in Christian churches today, like the children of Israel, are living as if they were still under the bondage of the past. They want someone to tell them what to do. God's plan for the Israelites and for Christians today is to have a personal relationship with Him, seeking guidance from Him regarding every manner of life. That's not to say that we shouldn't seek advice from those who we consider spiritually mature, we should! But our spiritual decisions and our life decisions need to be based on the prompting of the Holy Spirit backed by the truth given us in the Bible. The Spirit will not prompt us to do something which is against the teaching in His Word!

Similarly, we should learn to become dependent on God to provide all our spiritual sustenance. If we are dependent on the teaching of our pastor or Sunday School teachers for spiritual growth, then we are still babies needing to be spoon fed. Instead, we need to be constantly reading the Bible and studying it on our own. Not only will this provide us with greater spiritual growth, it will also permit us to be able to "search the Scripture daily to see whether these things are so." (**Acts 17:11**) If we don't know The Bible ourselves, how can we know whether the teachings that we are receiving in church each week are the truth.

This does not mean that we should abandon the regular preaching of God's Word from the pulpit and go off into the wilderness to "find God." There are many who are preaching the truth of God week in and week out. We should listen to them regularly and test what they teach us against what the Bible says. But there are also many who are preaching mush and mistruths from the pulpit week in and week out and we will never know who these are unless we apply ourselves to studying the Bible ourselves.

Lesson 2: - When our worship is based on the flesh instead of the spirit, we begin to walk in the ways of the flesh.

The Children of Israel had witnessed the idolatry of the Egyptians for their entire lives. It is likely that their parents told them the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, including how God had dealt personally with each of them, but they had never developed a personal relationship with the God of all creation themselves. As a result, when Moses was no longer around to guide them to the true God, they sought out the only form of religion they had previously known. They still claimed to be following *Yahweh*; they simply wanted a visible representation of Him. They invented their own new religion but called it by the same old name, *Yahweh* worship. The change was subtle but deadly. They didn't deny *Yahweh*. They even gave Him the credit for bringing them out of Egypt and leading them through the desert. They believed that they were worshipping *Yahweh*, but they were worshipping an idol.

The problem is that they were worshipping in the flesh, not in the spirit. They had formed a religion; a man-made set of rules and practices that had all the trappings of the truth but without the presence of the God of truth. They even offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. They gave of their wealth for the equipping of the religion. They were devoted followers and joined in with those of like belief. Instead of giving them life, however, their religion gave them death.

How many churches today are filled with the things of the world instead of the things of God? Each service begins with song and the members join in chorus together to the God of their salvation. They offer their burnt offering, calling them tithes, and give of their time and talents as a form of thanks offering. They sit down to pray, and they leave the service without ever having had their hearts touched by the Master. They have a religion that satisfies their consciences, but they never feel the spiritual prodding or the chastening of a loving God. They leave at the end of the service being comfortably dead. They have an eased conscience, but they are deaf to the call of a merciful Savior. And one day they will wake up in Hell, perhaps wondering why, with no one to blame but themselves.

Lesson 3: - When we spend time alone with God, the sin of the world seems exceedingly sinful in contrast to the holiness of God, even to the point of stirring up our anger.

For forty days Moses enjoyed close fellowship with *Yahweh*. During the same time the children of Israel were far from Him. Moses' experience was one of spiritual communion with God. The Israelites' experience was one of sinful, fleshly communion with others of like thoughts and feelings. In fact, the Israelites were so comfortable in their sinfulness that they didn't even recognize it as such. After all, they were worshipping *Yahweh*, weren't they? They couldn't see their false religion for what it really was because it had been a while since they had spent time in God's presence.

Moses, on the other hand, had immersed himself in the presence of God. His entire focus for the past forty days had been on God, learning what he could. Then, when God told him to get off the mountain because of the wickedness of his people, Moses headed down the slopes carrying God's word in his hands. Upon reaching the camp, Moses was appalled at what he saw. He didn't see a church service going on. He didn't hear worship hymns being sung. He didn't see the wonderful ministry which had resulted from the offerings of the people. He saw idolatry! He saw the works of the flesh! He saw sin! He saw *Yahweh* being mocked and ridiculed! And it made him Mad!

Lesson 4: - When confronted by our own sin we need to humble ourselves, confess our sin, and place ourselves at the mercy of our holy, righteous God.

When confronted by their sin, most of the Israelites knew they had done wrong. Some of them, however, refused to cease their wicked ways. They saw nothing wrong with it and they enjoyed it, so they kept on doing it. As a result, Moses had the Levites go throughout the camp killing those who were blind to their own wickedness. Then, taking the guilt of the entire nation, Moses fell before God and confessed the sinfulness of the people.

Yes, we have a Savior who paid the price for all our sins; past, present, and future. But that doesn't mean that we can just keep on sinning and not deal with it. Look at what happened to the Israelites who behaved that way. They were killed! Instead of ignoring or making excuses for our sin, we need to fall on our knees before God and confess them.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

Our God is a merciful God! Through the blood of Christ He can, and He will, forgive us our sins. With our righteousness restored, we can once again have fellowship with *Yahweh*, our Creator God. And only in the presence of God, with our fellowship restored, can we know the peace that passes all understanding.

And all the praise goes to Him!