EXODUS

Chapter 32

*The Golden Calf*

**When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods 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.” 2 Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” 3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. 4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.” 6 So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. 7 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. 8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ 9 “I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. 10 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.” 11 But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “O Lord,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’ ” 14 Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. 15 Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. 16 The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. 17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp.” 18 Moses replied: “It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear.” 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. 20 And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. 21 He said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?” 22 “Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. 23 They said to me, ‘Make us gods 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.’ 24 So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” 25 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. 26 So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him. 27 Then he said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’ ” 28 The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. 29 Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.” 30 The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” 31 So Moses went back to the Lord and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. 32 But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” 33 The Lord replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. 34 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.” 35 And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.**

**32:1** *so long.* Forty days and forty nights (see 24:18 and note). (CSB)

*they.* Probably the tribe and clan leaders. (CSB)

*gods.* See NIV text note. (CSB)

The people requested multiple gods, but Aaron made just one idol (v 4). The people may have imagined that the calf carried another, invisible god. (TLSB)

*Moses who brought us up out of Egypt.* A rebellious contrast to the gracious statement of Israel’s covenant Lord (see 20:2 and note; 29:46). (CSB)

As the Lord had gone before them in a pillar of cloud or fire, so the people wanted a visible representation of their idols to lead them. Ephraim Syrus: “They had been secretly worshiping [the idol] in their hearts.… Moses who kept them in awe was removed from them, that the idolatry might cry aloud in their mouths, which the restraint of Moses had kept down in their hearts” (*NPNF* 2 13:312). (TLSB)

**32:2–3** Both men and women wore earrings and donated them for the idol’s manufacture. Tertullian: “The people were about to lose, as a judgment upon themselves, the true ornaments for the ears [:] the words of God” (*ANF* 3:636). (TLSB)

**32:2** *gold earrings.* Probably part of the plunder brought from Egypt (see 3:21–22; 11:2–3; 12:35–36). (CSB)

**32:4** *fashioned it with a graving tool*. After casting the gold into the right shape, Aaron finished it with a carving tool. The idol may have been made of wood that was overlaid with gold, allowing it later to be burned and ground up (v 20). (TLSB)

*cast in the shape of a calf.* Either gold plating over a carved wooden calf (it was later burned, v. 20) or crudely cast in solid gold and then further shaped with a tool, later to be melted down in the fire. The calf was probably similar to representations of the Egyptian bull-god Apis (see note on Jer 46:15). Its manufacture was a flagrant violation of God’s commandment (20:4–5). (CSB)

An image of a calf or young bull; a common symbol of fertility and power in many religions. (TLSB)

*they.* The leaders among the people (see note on v. 1). (CSB)

*These are your gods … up out of Egypt.* A parody of 20:2 (see note on v. 1). Centuries later, King Jeroboam would quote these words when he set up two golden calves in the northern kingdom of Israel (see 1Ki 12:28–29). (CSB)

Aaron is likely referring to the idol and Yahweh as Israel’s gods, mixing truth and error. (TLSB)

**32:5** *Aaron saw*. Or, “Aaron was afraid,” which some believe to be the reason Aaron cooperated with the people in this false worship. (TLSB)

*altar in front of the calf … festival to the Lord*. Apparently Aaron recognized the idolatrous consequences of his deed and acted quickly to keep the people from turning completely away from the Lord. (CSB)

Aaron is mixing forbidden idolatry with the worship of the true God. (TLSB)

**32:6** *they sat down … indulge in revelry.* A pagan symbol evoked pagan religious practices. Paul quotes this sentence as a vivid example of Israel’s tendency toward idolatry (see 1Co 10:7). The Hebrew verb translated “indulge in revelry” often has sexual connotations (see, e.g., “caressing,” Ge 26:8). Immoral orgies frequently accompanied pagan worship in ancient times. (CSB)

*peace offerings*. Part of the animal was burned in sacrifice; the rest was eaten by the people. (TLSB)

*to play*. Implies immoral activity done for the honor of the god. See note, Gn 26:8, which describes the same term. Tertullian: “Understand the modest language of Holy Scripture: [genuine] ‘play,’ … would not have [been] reprehended” (*ANF* 4:105). Melanchthon: “When their stomachs were full and they felt at ease, they forgot all about God and became negligent and wanton” (Chem, *LTh* 2:668). (TLSB)

**32:7, 9** *your people … these people.* By not calling Israel “my people” (as, e.g., in 3:10), God indicates that he is disowning them for breaking his covenant with them. (CSB)

Not “My people,” as previous, because they are not acting like God’s children. (TLSB)

**32:7** *corrupt.* And, therefore, ripe for destruction (see v. 10; Ge 6:11–13). (CSB)

**32:9** *stiff-necked.* Like unresponsive oxen or horses (see Jer 27:11–12; see also note on Ne 3:5). (CSB)

A yoked or haltered animal might tighten its neck muscles to resist having its head turned to go a new direction. Like a farm animal that refused to be guided, Israel refused to follow God’s new direction for them. (TLSB)

**32:10** *wrath may burn hot*. God communicated His holy nature in terms that humans could understand. Here, He compared His reaction to human anger. (TLSB)

*I will make you into a great nation.* After Israel—Abraham’s descendants—has been destroyed, God will transfer to Moses the pledge originally given to Abraham (see Ge 12:2). (CSB)

God promised Abraham that he would be a great nation. God could do this only through Moses, one of Abraham’s descendants, and still be faithful to His promise. (TLSB)

**32:11** *Moses implored*. Moses interceded for God’s mercy on Israel. This shows that Moses has grown in love for Israel. Augustine: “Moses makes intercession for them.… And that he might not seem to have acted thus from necessity rather than from love, God offered [Moses] another people.… But he did not accept it; he cleaves to the sinners, he prays for the sinners” (*NPNF* 1 6:387). (TLSB)

*your people.* Using God’s own words (see v. 7 and note), Moses appeals to God’s special relationship to Israel, then to God’s need to vindicate his name in the eyes of the Egyptians (see v. 12), and finally to the great patriarchal promises (see v. 13). (CSB)

**32:12** *Why should the Egyptians say*. Moses argued that God’s justified destruction of Israel might cause the nations to blaspheme God and become even more alienated from Him. (TLSB)

*Turn* … *relent*. Though God would be just in punishing Israel, Moses cried for mercy. (TLSB)

**32:13** *Israel.* Jacob (see 33:1; see also Ge 32:28). (CSB)

Moses trusted the divine promise to the patriarchs and asked for God’s mercy. (TLSB)

**32:14** *the Lord relented.* See note on Jer 18:7–10; see also 2Sa 24:16; Ps 106:45; Am 7:1–6; Jas 5:16. (CSB)

Luther: “It is superfluous to enter on the subtle question here how God can repent, turn from and regret His anger, since He is unchangeable. Some people are deeply concerned about this; they complicate the matter for themselves unnecessarily” (AE 19:88–89). (TLSB)

*His*. Though they have sinned, God still acknowledges them as His people and not just Moses’ people (cf v 7). (TLSB)

**32:15** *went down the mountain.* See note on 24:18. (CSB)

*two tablets.* See note on 31:18. (CSB)

*Testimony.* See notes on 16:34; 25:16. (CSB)

The Ten Commandments. These tablets were small enough for Moses to carry in one hand. (TLSB)

*inscribed on both sides.* Tablets were often thus inscribed in ancient times. (CSB)

Detail often missing in artistic portrayals. (TLSB)

**32:16** *work of God … writing of God.* See 31:18. (CSB)

Words were cut into the stone. (TLSB)

**32:17** *Joshua.* Perhaps he had accompanied Moses part of the way up the mountain (see 24:13). (CSB)

Moses’ assistant went part of the way with Moses, but Moses was alone when he spoke with God (24:15). (TLSB)

**32:18–19** *singing* … *dancing*. Likely reflecting practices associated with pagan worship. Cf v 6. (TLSB)

**32:19** *breaking them to pieces.* Thus testifying against Israel that they had broken the covenant. (CSB)

In anger, showing that Israel had broken God’s covenant. (TLSB)

**32:20** *burned it … ground it to powder.* King Jeroboam’s altar (see note on v. 4) at Bethel received the same treatment (see 2Ki 23:15). (CSB)

Moses completely destroyed the idol and made Israel drink the remains in water. This provided a strong reminder that their sin had polluted them thoroughly (cf Nu 5:24–26). Cyprian: “Why do you bow your body captive before foolish images and creations of earth? God made you upright; and while other animals are downlooking, and are depressed in posture bending towards the earth, yours is a lofty attitude; and your countenance is raised upwards to heaven, and to God” (*ANF* 5:462). (TLSB)

**32:22–24** In his desperation, Aaron blamed the people (see notes on Ge 3:12–13). (CSB)

**32:22** *they are set on evil*. The people wanted to sin and were bound to sin. Like Adam (Gn 3:12), Aaron tries to deflect responsibility to others without confessing his sin. (TLSB)

**32:24** *out came this calf.* Aaron could hardly have thought that Moses would believe such an incredible story. (CSB)

Denying his guilt, Aaron implies that the idol was formed miraculously. (TLSB)

**32:25** *were running wild … get out of control.* The same Hebrew root underlies both phrases and is found also in Pr 29:18 (“cast off restraint”). Anarchy reigns among people who refuse to obey and worship the Lord. (CSB)

*Aaron had let them*. The people, out of control, had given in to their sinful passions.

*break loose*. Hbr can also refer to nakedness. (TLSB)

*enemies*. The Egyptians and others who did not worship the true God would mock this behavior. (TLSB)

**32:26** *gate*. Entrance at one end of camp. Gates commonly served as gathering places. (TLSB)

*Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.* See Jos 24:15; 1Ki 18:21; Mt 6:24. (CSB)

Those who had been faithful to the true God and had not participated in the idolatry. (TLSB)

*all.* A generalization since Dt 33:9 implies that some of the Levites were also slain. (CSB)

*Levites.* The descendants of Levi (Ge 29:34) may have originally been regarded as priests (Dt 18:6–8). But at some stage they became subordinate to the priests who were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses (38:21; Nu 3:9–10; 1 Ch 16:4–6, 37–42). (CSB)

Priests would come from this tribe, as did Moses and Aaron. (TLSB)

**32:27** *gate to gate*. From one end to the other. (TLSB)

*killing his brother and friend and neighbor.* See Mt 10:37; Lk 14:26. (CSB)

Fellow Israelites, not just Levites. Anyone who did not come forward as being “on the Lord’s side” (v 26) was guilty of idolatry. Some of these were killed. (TLSB)

**32:28** *The Levites did as Moses commanded.* Their zeal for the Lord is later matched by Aaron’s grandson Phinehas, resulting in a perpetual covenant of the priesthood (see Nu 25:7–13). (CSB)

*three thousand*. Small percentage of those who had committed idolatry. The punishment was not as severe as it might have been. (TLSB)

**32:29** *You have been set apart to the Lord today.* Because of their zeal for the Lord the Levites were set apart to be caretakers of the tabernacle and aides to the priests (see Nu 1:47–53; 3:5–9, 12, 41, 45; 4:2–3). (CSB)

The Levites had shown their dedication to God by placing Him above all people. (TLSB)

*son* … *brother*. All Israelites were related. Levites showed that loyalty to God is more important than family ties. (TLSB)

*bestow a blessing*. The Levites (along with others) received God’s blessing, first promised to Abraham (Gn 12:2–3), that they would be God’s people. (TLSB)

**32:30** *great sin*. All sin is serious, but this crass idolatry was a rejection of God. (TLSB)

*make atonement for your sin.* By making urgent intercession before God, as the mediator God had appointed between himself and Israel. No sacrifice that Israel or Moses might bring could atone for this sin. But Moses so identified himself with Israel that he made his own death the condition for God’s destruction of the nation (see v. 32). Jesus Christ, the great Mediator, offered himself on the cross to make atonement for his people. (CSB)

Moses did not tell Israel how he proposed to do this, but the following verses made his intentions clear. (TLSB)

**32:32** *book you have written.* See notes on Ps 9:5; 51:1; 69:28. (CSB)

Ancient kings would keep lists of their subjects—those who belonged to the king. Moses offered to be cut off from God’s people or even lose his life if it might be helpful to Israel. But such an exchange is not possible. The life of one sinner is not enough to pay for another (Ps 49:7–8). Ambrose: “What reproaches Moses had to bear from his people!… With what gentle words used he to address the people, even after he was wronged! He comforted them in their labors, consoled them by his prophetic declarations of the future, and encouraged them by his works” (*NPNF* 2 10:48). St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “What a devoted advocate! who, because he does not seek his own interests, easily obtains everything which he seeks. What a benign chief, who, binding together his people with bonds of charity as the head is united with the members, will either save them with himself or else encounter the same danger as they!” (*SLSB*, p 72). (TLSB)

**32:33** *Whoever has sinned … I will blot out.* Moses’ gracious offer is refused, because the person who sins is responsible for his own sin (see Dt 24:16; Eze 18:4 and note). (CSB)

A blunt reminder that sin merits death (Rm 6:23). Everyone who sinned would die, though not all died at that moment. (TLSB)

**32:34** *Now go, lead the people.* Thus Moses received assurance that the Lord will continue his covenant with wayward Israel and fulfill his promise concerning the land. (CSB)

*the place I spoke of.* Canaan (see 33:1).

**32:35** *they made* … *Aaron made*. The people were responsible for their sin as Aaron was responsible for his. (TLSB)

**Ch 32** Feeling alone in the wilderness, Israel soon doubts God’s promises and turns to idolatry. Their idol is unable to help them, and they experience greater suffering. We, too, may grow impatient or doubt God’s promises. In fear or doubt, we may turn to idols of our own: anything that we “fear, love, and trust” more than the true God. But these idols cannot help us. Thank God that He remembers His promises and is faithful to us, even when we are unfaithful. He sends His Son to offer atonement for our sin. He alone is able to take the sin of the world upon Himself and give us His perfect righteousness. We are God’s people because of Him. • O Christ, Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, thank You for giving Yourself for me. Forgive my sins, and strengthen me to believe in You and love You. Amen. (TLSB)