



Scotts Hill Baptist Church

GOD'S EXIT PLAN • IDOL FACTORIES • EXODUS 32:1-6 • 5/11/2025

MAIN POINT

When we follow our fallen hearts, we can become idol factories. We must not let good things become god-things.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Name a time or situation in which you have to wait on something or someone (i.e., waiting for a doctor's appointment, waiting in line, waiting in traffic, waiting to get married).

During times or periods of waiting, what are some feelings, emotions, or actions that you display while waiting?

I cannot think of anything worse than waiting, but it really seems that the old adage, "good things come to those who wait" is a theme repeatedly mentioned throughout the Bible. Today we will be looking at a story in Exodus where the Israelites began an unhealthy cycle of obedience and disobedience to God. The beginning of the Israelites' compromise was due to a lack of patience and trust in God, which caused them to fashion idols of their own choosing.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EXODUS 32:1.

Why were the people so eager to abandon their faith?

What are situations that cause us to worry and doubt in our faith?

The Israelites had already agreed to obey the Ten Commandments and their leader, Moses, had been gone for around 40 days. The people were ready to give up on God, break the commandments, and follow their own path.

What commandments were the Israelites ready to break?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EXODUS 32:2-4.

Aaron was left in charge and served as the spokesperson for Moses. Why do you think Aaron was so quick to compromise to the people's pleas?

What are some ways in which we "go along with the crowd"?

Aaron's lack of leadership caused the heart issue of compromise to become full-blown. He feared persecution from the crowd instead of fearing punishment from the Lord.

Aaron's compromise produced an idol that the people began to give credit for freeing them from Egypt. What are some idols in our lives?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EXODUS 32:5-6.

An interesting aspect of this passage is that after Aaron made and fashioned the golden calf, he made an announcement that there would be a festival to the Lord. The Israelites weren't necessarily trying to make a substitute for God, but they were wanting to worship God on their own terms. In their "worship" of the Lord, they ended up throwing a big party with drinking, dancing, and a little debauchery thrown in for good measure.

What are some ways that we like to "add to" or "take away" from God's Word?

Why was this type of "worship" detestable in God's eyes?

An idol is anything we like to substitute or even add to our worship of God. How do idols begin to distract us from God?

In having and making idols, we become just like the Israelites in that we shift our focus off of God and onto His creation. We make false substitutes for our love, devotion, money, and time. Society has taught us that all of this stuff, all of the awards, accolades,

popularity, money, or prestige will bring us happiness and fulfillment, but in the end it leads us to emptiness, loneliness, and regret.

Why do you think the Israelites were doubting God?

In what ways does doubting God lead us toward destructive behavior?

Doubting God's promises is the enemy's first weapon in causing God's people to wander away from our faith and be disobedience. When the enemy causes us to doubt God's promises, we should remember the past instead of focusing on the present.

What are some situations that cause us to doubt God's promises (i.e., death of a loved one, loss of job, financial problems, divorce, disasters, etc.)?

If the Israelites had remembered what God had promised and how God had continually come through for them, they would have trusted instead of doubting. God had parted the Red Sea, God had provided manna from heaven, and water from a rock. In each of these situations, God continually showed His faithfulness. Instead of doubting God during times of waiting, we can remember what God has done in the past and continue to trust Him even in the midst of the worst of circumstances.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EXODUS 32:7.

Why do you think God used "your" (referring to Moses) instead of "My" (referring to Himself) in referencing the Israelites?

While Moses was on top of the mountain getting the covenant between the Israelites and God written in stone, the people at the bottom of the mountain were breaking that very covenant. In many ways the changing of "my people" to "your people" sets the stage for the rest of the story. Moses knew that if the covenant was broken then the promises, provision, and blessings from God were non-binding as well. This also shows an important aspect of leadership that as leaders we are in some ways held responsible for the actions of those under our care.

Why are leaders sometimes held responsible for the actions of those under them?

| ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ EXODUS 32:8-9.

What is God's response to the people's sin?

What is different about God's anger in contrast with ours?

God's anger is a holy and righteous anger. In his book, "Knowing God," J.I. Packer summarizes it well: "God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil." Nowhere is God's anger and wrath more on display than when Jesus is crucified on the cross. Even in His anger and wrath, God demonstrates His love.

In what ways were the Israelites a "stiff-necked" people? How are we sometimes a "stiff-necked" people?

Being "stiff-necked" is not a compliment, nor is it something that we like to admit. We display our stubbornness and rebelliousness in various ways. We make excuses, blame others, and refuse to listen to reason. The outward actions of a stiff-necked people reveals the hardness of their heart. The Israelite nation had allowed pride and a desire to be liked by everyone else to lead them to worshiping false idols.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EXODUS 32:10.

What promise did God make to Moses?

Why do you think God made the offer to start over with Moses?

If you were Moses, would you have taken God up on His offer? Explain.

Moses was raised as part of Pharaoh's house, exiled into the wilderness as a shepherd, and called by God to be the deliverer of God's people out of Egypt. Yet under his leadership, the Israelites did little but cry, complain, and continue to break God's covenant.

God told Moses to return at once because the people committed such grave offenses, and in verse 10, God gave Moses an interesting choice. Just as God told Noah, He was going to wipe out all of the people and start over. God was going to fulfill His covenant with Abraham through Moses. Moses could have accepted God's offer and had every right to allow God's wrath, justice, and righteous anger destroy all of the disobedient Israelites. But, Moses did the unthinkable. He set aside his rights and privileges to save the nation. In this way, Moses foreshadows Jesus. Jesus had every right to come down and be only our judge, but instead He came to be our Savior.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How could remembering what God has done in the past prevent us from doubting Him in the present situation?

As a leader, Aaron gave into the crowd when pressured to compromise his faith. What are some ways that we as leaders can strengthen our faith and not compromise when the crowd begins to pressure us?

What are some areas of compromise in your life that you need to repent of and turn back to the Lord in full devotion?

What sort of idols have you been able to overcome in the power of the Holy Spirit? Share with somebody this week an idol that you still need to overcome in Christ.

PRAYER

Thank Jesus that we can ask for forgiveness for when we substitute His love for a lie and for when we doubt and disobey Him. Pray that He would equip us with strength and courage in the face of adversity.

COMMENTARY

| EXODUS 32:1-6

32:1 The question may be raised as to whether Moses' intent as narrator of this material was to convey the idea that the people "gathered around Aaron" or that they "gathered against Aaron." The Hebrew expression for "employed" is used by Moses only three other times, all in Numbers and all in contexts of opposition and hostility, where the proper translation is "gather against" or the like. The only other usage of this same compound term is found in Ezek 38:7, where it clearly does not mean "gather against" but in fact means "gather around" in support. Alternatively, it may be that the expression had a large enough range of meaning that it was always technically ambiguous in itself and required contextual definition. Since Ezekiel's Hebrew is centuries later than that of Moses' and may reflect semantic drift over time for this particular compound, it is safest to assume that Moses' own usage would be consistent and that he intended his readers to

understand that the people gathered in hostility against Aaron to pressure him into helping them return to idolatry (cf NJPS). This does not excuse Aaron, who should have been willing to resist such pressure but who instead caved in to it. Yet it does tell us that Aaron may have acted partly out of fear for his own popularity/wellbeing/acceptance or the like.

But why did the people want “gods who can go before us”? Were they not satisfied with Yahweh’s leadership during the past months, as he went before them day and night? The answer was partly a matter of the strong attractions of idolatry, partly a matter of the absence of Moses, who was so closely associated with Yahweh’s presence, partly a matter of the passage of time during which the obvious presence of Yahweh in the pillar of cloud and fire was lacking, partly a matter of the attractiveness of the idea of a syncretism of Yahwism with the Egyptian bull cult (see below), but mostly a matter of something that continues to plague even Christian people today: an inability to see that the spiritual world is primary to and in control of the physical and visible world. In order to help his people understand the truth, Yahweh insisted on being believed in rather than being seen. It was so much easier to believe in something that could actually be seen. The Israelites were powerfully attracted to the latter option.

The reference to Moses as “this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt” is not an attempt to avoid thinking of Yahweh as the one who rescued the people from their slavery; rather, it is consistent with God’s own characterization of Moses as the deliverer. In Exodus sometimes Moses is described as the one who brought Israel out of Egypt and other times it is Yahweh who is so described.

In saying “we don’t know what has happened to him,” the people were reflecting not just a genuine confusion but also a lack of faith at the same time. Had they been willing to trust God fully, they would have been willing to wait as long as necessary for Moses to return. But their assumptions got the best of them: it appeared after “a very long time” (the meaning of “forty days and forty nights” in 24:18 and of “so long” in 32:1) that Moses might not be coming back at all. The people had manna and water, so they were not panicked for food; but they wanted to get on with their journey and not stay in the wilderness of Sinai forever, a place where they had recently suffered an unprovoked attack by Amalekites. They needed, in their opinion, guidance, protection, and divine power backing them in their conquest of the promised land. They needed, they thought, real, tangible gods. When one remembers what a closely won military contest the battle at Rephidim had been (17:8-16), it is not so surprising that they would not have wanted again to experience that sort of uncertainty.

32:2-4 Acceding to the pressure he felt from the people, Aaron helped them revert to idolatry. Seeking the appropriate material (gold), he asked for earrings from the women and children, but not the men. This could reflect his estimation that more than enough earrings would be produced that way to have sufficient gold for an idol, leaving the men still resplendent in their own earrings. Or it could reflect the fact that only women and children—not men—wore earrings among the Israelites, perhaps because earrings were a visible sign that only a man's "dependents" wore, either in Egypt or generally among Israelites.

The statement "so all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron" does not imply in the original that every single Israelite had agreed to the idolatry. Exactly how Aaron built the golden young bull idol is difficult to decipher. What the NIV translates as "made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool" the NRSV, for example, translates as "formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf."

Collecting the earrings, melting them into gold, and shaping the gold around a wooden form to make an idol may have taken more than a day. This, indeed, could have built the suspense. The result was full approbation, unfortunately. Not only had Aaron made an idol, but he apparently had made a good one—so the reaction of people (an indefinite but large group described simply as "they") was to recognize Aaron's work as an idol fit for them to follow and indeed to have followed. That is, they recognized the calf as the embodiment of the divinity that had led them in their exodus and so told each other, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Such an announcement sounds much like that made by Jeroboam I when he introduced to the northern Israelites his countercultus golden young bulls ("Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt," 1 Kgs 12:28), the only difference being that Jeroboam said "Here are ..." and the people surrounding Aaron said "These are ..." In all likelihood Jeroboam knew of or was informed of the tradition stemming from this passage and capitalized on its continuing popularity in his own day. In either case, there is little doubt that Israelites of all times believed that it was Yahweh, and no other god, who had delivered them from Egypt. In other words, Yahweh was now being represented by an idol, the very sort of thing forbidden clearly by the second word/commandment.

32:5 Just as Jeroboam in his day was trying to modify the true religion of Yahweh into an idolatrous version, so Aaron attempted something of the reverse: to salvage worship of Yahweh by associating the idolatrous version squarely with Yahweh, building an altar in front of the calf, and declaring a "festival" (worship-feast day) to Yahweh for the following day. Building an altar in front of a god/idol conformed to the expected positioning of

sacrifices in idolatry; it guaranteed that the god would see the offerings made to him and accept them. By contrast the orthodox biblical positioning of the altar in the courtyard of the tabernacle, and later temple, so that there was no direct line of sight from the ark in the holy of holies to the altar because of the curtain/veil hiding the ark was actually a positioning that required Israelites to have the faith to understand that the one true God actually saw what they did for him without having his idol right behind and facing the altar on which they did it.

32:6 Again imitating orthodoxy through idolatry, the people “sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings,” which were forms of offering otherwise appropriate for Yahweh (on burnt offerings see Exod 10:25; 18:12; 20:24; 24:5; 29:18, 25, 42; 30:9, 28; 31:9; on fellowship offerings see 20:24-25; 29:28). “Burnt offerings,” also known as “whole burnt offerings,” sought atonement for the worshiper’s sin. “Fellowship offerings,” also known as “sacrifices/offerings of well-being” celebrated the worshiper’s ongoing covenant relationship with Yahweh. Had they been worshiping Yahweh correctly at his tabernacle, they would have been doing a good thing; but here they were worshiping exactly as forbidden in the second word/commandment (Exod 20:4-6, 23) and were ignoring a law they had solemnly agreed to keep (24:3, 7).

Further copying the worship styles of idolatry after eating and drinking the idol-worship meal prepared from their fellowship offerings, the people began to engage in “having fun” (NIV “revelry,” HCSB “to revel”). If any overtone of sexual debauchery is intended here, it is not followed through in the rest of the narrative: Moses later described shouting (v. 17), singing (v. 18), and dancing (v. 19), but not the sort of cultic prostitution the Israelites later indulged in at another location (Num), and identified the people’s sin as idolatry per se (vv. 31-32; 34-35). The revelry of the occasion was apparently singing and dancing with abandon, bad enough as a means of celebration of the people’s newfound relationship with an idol.

| EXODUS 32:7-10

32:7 In saying to Moses, “Go down ...,” God was not bringing his time with Moses on Mount Sinai to a hasty conclusion. The tabernacle instructions, which were the purpose of this particular time with God on the mountain, had been completed, as their fulfillment narrative (chaps. 35–40) confirms, and the next forty days and nights on the mountain were soon to come at any rate (34:1–28). Although the people’s idolatrous rebellion against Yahweh’s covenant could conceivably be regarded as an interruption of the

process of revealing the law to Moses, it was neither a long-term nor an insurmountable interruption.

The fact that God used second-person speech of Moses' role in the exodus ("your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt") does not represent God's shifting of blame or responsibility away from himself to Moses but is consistent with the way attribution of leadership for the exodus varies according to context. God here assigned Moses the responsibility to deal with the sin of the people with whom he had become so closely identified. The NIV translation "[the people] have become corrupt" is doubtful. Such a meaning is possible for the verb in question here if it were used in the niph'al (e.g., Gen 6:11; 8:20), but the piel, the verb stem actually employed here, has more the meaning "to ruin, to act ruinously, to do a corrupt thing." In other words, God was not saying to Moses that the Israelites were no longer capable of doing good (i.e., had become corrupt in the sense of being spoiled/polluted or the like) but that they had done something so wrong that it constituted acting corruptly. Thus, for example, the NRSV "have acted perversely" or the HCSB "have acted corruptly" more nearly capture the sense that the situation, while very serious, was not one of no hope whatever for Israel's redemption.

32:8 However, God's summary for Moses of what had happened in the camp while he had been on the mountain indicates how much the nation had already turned from its promise to follow Yahweh's covenant. Even if every single person had not participated, many had eagerly done so, and the rest had not acted to repudiate them, with the result that the nation as a whole, the nation on balance, can be described simply as "they": "They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them" indicates the divine assessment of Israel's propensities to covenant infidelity.

God then defined this sin clearly, leaving no doubt that the second commandment had been violated utterly. They made for "themselves" a metal-plated idol (rather than merely being camped near where one existed already or rather than having a few people try to make a crude clay idol) "in the shape of a bull" (see below), bowed down to it ("worshiped it," clearly indicating their belief that it was a god), "sacrificed to it" (further proving their belief that it had the power to bless and save them), openly stated that it represented the gods they now had chosen to believe in (thus also potentially violating the first commandment against worshiping any god but Yahweh), and attributed to the idol their rescue from Egypt, thus associating Yahweh syncretistically with the young bull, as if now, finally, Yahweh could be properly worshiped and his presence properly represented among them in contrast to the inferior ways it had been previously manifest. Since God himself had chosen his ways of personal manifestation in the past (fire, smoke, pillar,

overpowering voice), the people's choice of a dumb idol who could do none of these things over the living God was also a rejection of his methods of demonstrating his presence. What they could see and touch at their convenience was what they wanted—a god who would let them live as they wished and have a good time when they wanted to and who would not impose his covenant requirements on them. Theirs was a foolish choice reflecting badly on any people so self-absorbed and self-destructive as to make it.

What made this particular kind of idol seem so “right” to the Israelites that when they saw it they proclaimed, “These are your gods”? Indeed, what caused Aaron—to the extent that he felt he had an easy choice in the matter—to select this design to represent Yahweh idolatrously, as opposed to any other of the many designs that may have been theoretically within his range of options? The answer may provide insight into the thinking of the people. Substantial evidence exists to suggest that an idol in the shape of a young bull fit with the Egyptian concept of how deity was to be envisioned.

A vigorous young bull seemed to the Egyptians an appropriate way to represent a truly powerful god. In other words, by their actions Aaron and the people showed themselves still to be “Egyptian Israelites” rather than “Yahweh’s Israelites.” They demonstrated that they were not really at home away from home but were beginning already to long for a reversion to the ways of living and thinking they grew up with and that in retrospect seemed comfortable and, indeed, better than what they were now experiencing (cf. the overt expression of this a year later in Num 14 and the similar challenge of Yahweh to Moses relative to destroying the Israelites in that context). The people were, in other words, so wedded to their old culture that they could manage to justify in their minds its false religion, even to the point of the type of animals used to represent a god, even though that religion had been proved false over and over again by Yahweh’s mighty acts on their behalf right up to the present time (so esp. 12:12). Old habits and ways of thinking die hard; in times of stress people often revert to them even though they are useless or destructive. Such are the limits of reliance on human wisdom in a fallen world.

32:9–10 In Hebrew the idiom “I have seen this people” means “I am fully aware of what this people is like” or “I know all about this nation.” It does not suggest that God would have to pay special attention to a group in order to know what they were doing. In other words, it does not suggest him to be less than omniscient as if he hadn’t been seeing them at all times. “Stiff-necked” is a compound adjective meaning “stubborn and oppositional.”

In saying “Now leave me alone” God made a rhetorical demand. He was challenging Moses rather than commanding him. Moses had no power to stop God from doing anything, so

there would have been no need whatever for God to ask permission of Moses to do something through the statement “leave me alone.” Rather, it was a rhetorical way of saying to Moses: “Here is what I will do unless you intervene.” For God to announce to a prophet (Moses being the paradigm for all future prophets) his intention to do something as a way of inviting intercession has many parallels, the most famous perhaps being those of Amos 7:1–6, where God showed Amos things he was planning to do by way of judgment upon Israel and then, in response to Amos’ intercession, relented. In that context he was clearly inviting Amos to intercede so that he (God) might relent. A similarly prominent example is found in Jonah’s required announcement that Nineveh would be destroyed in “forty days” (Jonah 3:4), a message Jonah reluctantly gave because he knew that it represented an invitation to repent and not an irreversible condemnation.

In v. 10 God rhetorically proposed three things: to unleash his anger (“so that my anger may burn against them”), to destroy the current Israel (“that I may destroy them”), and to make a new nation from Moses’ descendants (“then I will make you into a great nation”), thus effectively replacing the promises to make Abraham into a great nation (e.g., Gen 12:2; renewed in Gen 18:18; 21:18; 35:11; 46:23) with new promises to do the same for Moses. This tested Moses’ commitment to God’s original plan, the plan to make a great people out of Abraham. Would the test proposal appeal to Moses? It certainly might have since it might have flattered him to think himself worthy of being the patriarch of a great new nation and of having the regularly troublesome Israelites eliminated by divine fiat so that his own future would be brighter and more successful.