

Exodus 32 • When Believers Lose Control

Introduction

To be sure, there are times when God requires that we step out in faith and trust Him for the results. Such situations may be out of **OUR** control, but of our faculties and demeanor we still retain complete control. One of the most common, visible indicators that something being done in the name and/or with the things of God is not, in reality, truly **OF** God is when we observe the participants to be out of control. They are using things that under regular circumstances are subordinate to God's desire, but in such circumstances are actually working only for their own desire. The final measure of such things is dependent on the degree to which such things agree or disagree with God's Word.

¹Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

[Read v.1]

Q: What kind of need do they exhibit and how do they go about addressing it? What does this reveal about their personality and character?

A: They have a spiritual need. They address it by doing the very things they've seen the Egyptians and other nations do—create and worship graven images. Although the need is legitimate, their proposal reveals that they lack the spiritual strength of character to stand on their own and do things the right way; they're easily influenced by others.

Point: *Spiritual deception is often rooted in allowing someone else's influence to replace the Word of God. Someone else's words and ways are never a substitute for God's Word and ways.*

Q: What is probably already visible right there before them that should have served as a tangible reminder that God was still with them?

A: The cloud and pillar of fire. God's glory—which led them every step of the way from Egypt—was probably still visible, even if now centered on the same mountain to which Moses ascended.

Q: Why didn't they simply go look for Moses? What might that indicate about their spiritual condition?

A: They didn't go looking for Moses because, in reality, they knew where he was: On the mountain covered by God's glory. They were forbidden to ascend the mountain. Taken together, this indicates that on a conscience level they knew the right thing to do but sought to appease themselves according to their own desire. It was a way of getting around God's "rules" or restrictions.

[Read v.2-6]

²Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

³Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."

⁵Now 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." ⁶So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to

Q: From where, most likely, did the Israelites obtain the gold rings they were wearing which they gave up to Aaron?

A: They were most likely part of the plunder the Lord gave them upon leaving Egypt.

Point: *What originated as the things of God were perverted to be used against God. This is a defining characteristic of apostasy repeated throughout Scripture: the misuse of the name and things of God. It is often the case that the gifts of God become desecrated by their employment in the service of sin.*

Q: What is the irony of what Aaron and the people were doing below in contrast to God and Moses above?

A: God through Moses was preparing the precious things that would be connected with His relationship to the people—the Law, the tabernacle, the priesthood, etc., while Aaron and company were making their own thing to establish a relationship with another.

drink, and rose up to play.

⁷Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’”

⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. ¹⁰Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.”

¹¹Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them,

Q: What seems almost preposterous about how their new god came about?

A: They witnessed every step of its creation. There was no doubt that it came from the gold they donated, the gold was melted in front of them, and the hardening material fashioned before their eyes by the hand of Aaron. There could be no doubt of its human, man-made origin.

Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile, and their precious things are of no profit; even their own witnesses fail to see or know, so that they will be put to shame.
Isaiah 44:9

Q: How do they further pervert the things of God already given to them?

A: They declare “a feast to the LORD” to be celebrated to their golden idol. They are taking the things already conveyed to them by God—feasts already outlined through Moses—and attempting to give their idol legitimacy by applying those things to it.

Point: *They have not only misapplied the gifts of God, but His Word.*
[Read v.7-8]

Q: How does God define the “corruption” that has taken place?

1. “...turned aside from the way which I commanded...” It began by forsaking God’s Word.
2. “...made for themselves a molten calf...” It took form by taking the gifts of God from service to Him and devoting them to the service of sin.
3. “...worshiped it...” They provided acknowledgment of its sovereignty and authority over them.
4. “...sacrificed to it...” They ascribed to it the power to forgive sin and reconcile their hearts.
5. “...and said, ‘This is your god...’” All things combined to produce a final, public acknowledgment of the thing with which they replaced the One True God.

Q: What does God call the Israelites? What does this indicate about how God reacts to substitutes for Him?

A: He calls them “your [Moses’] people” rather than “My people”. God does not consider anyone to be His that substitute another in His place.

[Read v.9-14]

Q: What is God’s specific problem with these people? What is their defining characteristic that causes God’s anger to burn so?

A: “They are an obstinate people”. Some versions provide the literal translation, “they are a stiff-necked people”, a people that will not yield or bend to the commandment of God. They are defined by their consistent rejection of God’s Word.

Q: What is Moses’ role? What support of that is provided in Scripture?

A: He is mediator for the people.

Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.

Exodus 18:19-20

I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.”

¹⁴So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”

Exodus 20:18-19

Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Exodus 33:9-11

Q: So if we understand that Moses’ chief role and calling is mediator, why could we think that God is here testing Moses?

A: A true mediator of God, whose heart is in the right place, will not seek an opportunity for himself, but show that he cares more for those on whose behalf he intercedes than for an opportunity to elevate himself.

Q: How do we know that whereas the people have failed to obey God’s Word, that Moses has proven that he adheres to it?

A: It’s God’s Word that Moses uses to mediate on behalf of the people.

Q: So how did God’s interaction with Moses serve to work on BOTH parties?

A: To the people it served as a warning that they could be rejected and lose everything provided by God—both now and for the future—and for Moses it served to refine his faith and spiritual leadership.

[Read v.15-18]

Q: Based on what we know of the people’s behavior to this point, what might singing indicate as to their spiritual condition?

A: They weren’t really engaging in activities consistent with celebrating a feast or sacrifices or peace offerings to the Lord as they said they were going to do. Their activities involving their new idol were clearly rooted in bringing pleasure only to their self.

Q: So what is the contrast provided between Moses and the people?

A: One was devoted to God’s desire through the keeping of His Word, the other devoted to their own pleasure at the expense of ignoring God’s Word.

¹⁵Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other. ¹⁶The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing engraved on the tablets.

¹⁷Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a sound of war in the camp.”

¹⁸But he said,

“It is not the sound of the cry of triumph,
Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat;
But the sound of singing I hear.”

¹⁹It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰He took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink it.

²¹Then Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you, that you have brought such great sin upon them?"

²²Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord burn; you know the people yourself, that they are prone to evil. ²³For they said to me, 'Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ²⁴I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

²⁵Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies—²⁶then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. ²⁷He said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.'" ²⁸So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day.

[Read v.19-24]

Q: Why did Moses shatter the tablets? What did it represent?

A: It represented the people's disobedience to God's Word. Their behavior shattered God's Word as clearly as Moses shattered the tablets.

Q: What were the benefits and/or lessons of grinding the calf to powder and making them eat it?

1. The loss of their earthly gold might teach them that disobedience will result in the loss of everything precious both for this life and the one to come.
2. There's a lesson here that there is no profit in spiritual disobedience.
3. Without any remains, the idol could never be reused in any form for future idolatrous activity. It teaches that complete and total removal is the only acceptable remedy for idolatry.
4. Throughout Scripture obedience to God's Word is symbolized by bread and being eaten to have one's spiritual hunger satiated, whereas disobedience is symbolized by eating and becoming sick.

Q: What do Aaron's lies teach us about false leaders?

A: Their favorite tools are to blame others and to blame the supernatural when, in fact, the leader himself is to blame. False teachers try to deflect blame from themselves onto something else. They also believe that the ends justify the means, so as to avoid, if possible, any discussion of events as they might be interpreted according to God's Word. In the lie that "out came this calf", he is trying to make the case that supernatural forces at work somehow trumped God's Word that should have instead been reinforced by him.

[Read v.25-28]

Q: What is one of the clear signs that an activity is NOT of God?

A: The participants are "out of control".

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:22-23

Q: Why should there be concern that being out of control led them "to be a derision among their enemies"?

A: It's an indication that in such a condition they cannot be an effective witness for God. The issue was not only hurting their personal relationship with God, but how He revealed Himself to others through them.

Application: Give an example of when someone in the name of Christianity has been "out of control" and how non-Christians were affected. How is it that non-believers know the difference between a truly spiritual event as opposed to something manufactured by man?

Q: What is the lesson we can learn and apply from the example of Moses leading the Levites against the rest of the people?

A: We must take seriously the need and task of cleansing the church of false worship.

²⁹Then Moses said, “Dedicate yourselves today to the LORD—for every man has been against his son and against his brother—in order that He may bestow a blessing upon you today.”

³⁰On the next day Moses said to the people, “You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

³¹Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, “Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. ³²But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!”

³³The LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. ³⁴But go now, lead the people where I told you. Behold, My angel shall go before you; nevertheless in the day when I punish, I will punish them for their sin.”

³⁵Then the LORD smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made.

[Read v.29-35]

Q: What does it take on our part to recover from “a great sin”, from rebellion against God?

1. To dedicate oneself (v.29). That is, to separate and devote oneself wholly and completely to God alone.
2. To seek atonement (v.30). That is, to cling to Christ as the intercessor on our behalf with God.

Q: How does Moses differ from Aaron in how he presents the situation?

A: Moses neither lies nor embellishes, but states the plain and simple truth.

Q: What is the meaning of God’s response to Moses’ empathetic request to “blot me out from Your book”?

A: God is basically stating that each individual is responsible for their own actions, for their own sin and its consequences.

Q: What might be revealed by the fact that a name must be blotted out rather than written in?

A: Every name **BEGINS** by being included; only by ones disobedience and choices is a name blotted out—erased.

Q: Does forgiveness always mean that there will be no punishment?

A: No. As in this example, sin has consequences. The priority is not to avoid punishment but to be reconciled to a right relationship with God.

Overall Application

- *What is the first step one takes that leads towards unfaithfulness, towards perverting the things of God into service for sin? [Hint: Disregard for God’s Word] Therefore, what’s the best way to prevent going astray?*
- *What are the characteristics of false worship? What clues aid in our discernment of wrong behavior and/or beliefs?*
- *Some people falsely believe that Christians are never allowed to judge. Why is that not true? What are the examples from this lesson? Do we see that allowing erroneous activities in Christ’s name destroys one’s witness to the world?*
- *What advice or guidelines would you give someone that has embraced false teaching or engaged in false worship that would reconcile them back to God?*