

RUF Bible Study – The Book of Exodus  
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Exodus 32-34 – The Golden Calf and Rock of Ages

We live in a day of image management and image consultants. If you have the money, you can hire someone to protect your image and even make sure your image is getting out there often enough to keep you interesting to the public.

The rest of us have to do it ourselves. So we put our best foot forward. And we get upset when people treat us the way they think we should be instead of the way we really are. Julie and I usually go out to eat with another couple in town whenever for our birthdays. I remember getting really mad when – for my birthday – we were going to places that *they* like. I was sitting in the parking lot at Legends, which is a cake dessert coffee place, and it was for my birthday. After a few years of this, I said no. We could go to Legends for their birthdays, but I wanted the sports bar for mine. I didn't like being treated in their image. I felt unknown to them.

We have a far more troubling scenario here than the wrong restaurant. We've been going through Exodus, looking at the story of redemption for God's people. We remind ourselves, like Phillip Ryken does in his commentary, that this story is our story; it is our history too. And now we have the most serious crisis yet. Things might come undone right here. And the Israelites have no one to blame but themselves.

In Orthodoxy, GK Chesterton writes:

*All Christianity concentrates on the man at the cross-roads. The vast and shallow philosophies, the huge syntheses of humbug, all talk about ages and evolution and ultimate developments. The true philosophy is concerned with the instant. Will a man take this road or that? – that is the only thing to think about, if you enjoy thinking. The aeons are easy enough to think about, any one can think about them. The instant is really awful: and it is because our religion has intensely felt the instant, that it has in literature dealt much with battle and in theology dealt much with hell. It is full of danger, like a boy's book: it is immortal crisis. There is a great deal of similarity between popular fiction and the religion of western people.*

We have here Moses at the cross-roads. All of God's people at the cross-roads.

### **Idolatry**

Moses is still up on the mountain. He's up there for forty days, and he's getting the layout and reasons for the tabernacle. But from the people's perspective, he's up there just a little too long. What is he doing up there? What if he doesn't come back. Yeah, we've been a little mean to him, but no one else is telling us what to do. The people may panic here, unsure if they've lost contact with God altogether. And anyway, *this Moses* isn't the only way to God.

They get an idea and go to Aaron with it. He doesn't put up any barriers that we read of but his gung ho and builds them just what they want – a golden calf. We've all heard of this. Why do they do it?

Remember this principle we've been noticing in Exodus – it is easier to get the people out of slavery than to get the slavery out of the people. Cows and bulls were big idols and gods in Egypt. So that's what the people think of when they want to represent god. It's important to realize that they weren't coming up with new gods – no, they wanted to have God in their midst, to have him be tangible and real to them. They were worshipping Yahweh. That's what Aaron says in verse five: "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord." Yahweh. Yahweh as they want him. Worshipping Yahweh by breaking the first and second commandments. How does that go over?

This was a sin of disobedience to be sure. They had already been told not to do this. But they wanted something to look at, to worship. They used their gold to do this, gold that was for the tabernacle.

It was also a sin of distrust. Could they really trust Moses? Was he really after their good? Would he come back? They had grumbled and mumbled against him before, and this is more of the same although writ large.

But it's also the sin of distortion. Why did they choose a bull? Bulls have power. But isn't God over all things like an eagle? Doesn't he have the ability to get into every place like a mouse? Isn't he wise like an owl? Isn't he the king like a lion? There is no image you can choose. Anything you pick is a distortion of him, a displaying of one of his attributes over another.

This god of theirs, this version of Yahweh is user-friendly. It's what they want.

A few other things we can note about this sin. Sin is following popularity instead of what is right. There was peer pressure here and Aaron caved to it. Sin is forgetting what God has done for us and going back to our old wicked ways. There

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**Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:** By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2007, website: [www.ouruf.org](http://www.ouruf.org). For this series, I used commentaries on Exodus from Cole, Ryken, Enns, Childs, Pink, Cassuto, Motyer and Currid, as well *A House for My Name* by Leithart, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by Alexander, and *The Gospel According to Moses* by A Dickson. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller and Les Newsom. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

isn't any real indication that this should happen. Yes, there have been grumblings, but this is for the most part, out of the blue. They have already forgotten. Sin is easy, it can happen fast. It's the wide road, the wide gate. It's doing what you want.

As Moses comes down the mountain, already knowing about what he'll find, he runs into Joshua, who apparently doesn't know what has happened. Joshua says, "*When Joshua heard the boisterous noise of the people shouting below them, he exclaimed to Moses, "It sounds like war in the camp!" But Moses replied, "No, it's not a shout of victory nor the wailing of defeat. I hear the sound of a celebration."*

What do they find? The word here for "celebration" or "revelry" has hints of sexual activity. Peter Enns writes, "This is not the festival Israel was intended to celebrate at the foot of God's holy mountain."<sup>2</sup> While this is true, we shouldn't get carried away here. The people aren't having an orgy and singing 100 bottles of beer on the wall. No, they're worshipping. But it's all wrong. We'll come back to that.

What does Aaron do when he's confronted with all of this? His reaction shows us more about the way sin works. First he tells his accuser to back off. Relax, little brother. Why are you so upset? We do the same. We like to turn the tables on the person who points out our sins.

Then, as per usual, he tries to blame others for what he's done. It was the people. They did it. They made me do it. There is always someone else to blame, isn't there? My parents made me this way. My husband doesn't treat me well. My wife isn't responsive enough to me. My boss doesn't respect me. He was yelling at me, she pushed me, they went behind my back, and on and on. Of course, there is always some truth to our excuses, and Moses knew the people, but that doesn't make it right.

Aaron also refused to admit what he had done. He lied about the full extent of his involvement, making sure that he minimizes his involvement in this sin. What happened? How did that get here? Huh. Wow. *They* did it. We call this "Spin." The Bible calls it lying. When we tell a part of the truth or our interpretation of the truth or just confess to some of it, we are in danger of the shadow of the golden calf.

This is a big sin. In fact, as you read through the Old Testament, you'll find that this keeps cropping up over and over again.<sup>3</sup> It seems so obvious a one to avoid. Don't build an idol of God. Check.

But how do we break this? Let me mention two ways.

The first is in conceptualizing and worshipping God in ways other than what he has revealed. We do this when we say, "My God wouldn't do that" or "I don't like to think of God like that." Or when we over-highlight one of his attributes over another. Is God all and only Love? Is God all and only Justice? We have to read the whole corpus of Scriptures and worship God as he has revealed himself to be.

One way you can discern if this is a problem for you is if God ever gets in your way. Does he ever surprise you or contradict you? If not, then it is most likely true that he isn't a real person. You are relating to someone you have made up or distorted. Real people don't always act the way you want them to. They cannot be remade in your image. You have to relate to them as they are, not as you want them to be. God is like that. Who is he? Are you worshipping him as he has commanded? Or in a way that you like? Is God fun to you? Is he jazzy and cool? Do you always feel near to him? Is he super immanent?

We must be aware to worship him as he commands, and not as we want. The Israelites thought they were worshipping Yahweh, but they weren't. This is a sin for Christians, for the people of God.

And we need to see that each of us struggles with idols in our lives. We place things in the place of God and want to serve them instead of God himself. They can be good things. They usually are good things. Grades. Looks. Marriage. Status. Children. Boyfriend. Winning. 4.0. Popularity. Knowledge. If we make these things our masters, we will slowly die. They will squeeze the life out of us. Only God deserves that place.

Most of us wouldn't go home and make a statue to place in our house. Most of us wouldn't bow down to that statue and gather others around to worship it together. But we see all around us improper worship of a distorted God. And we see in our own hearts a bowing down to other things besides God to give us life and meaning.

When you see these things will you attack the messenger? Will you shift the blame? Will you refuse to admit what you have done? Or will you repent? God saves sinners. We must confess our sins.

### ***Judgment***

Here we see that God REALLY doesn't like what Israel has done. None of us like being treated wrongly. I didn't like it when we went Legends. But what is the big deal here with God?

He is mad. In fact, right here the whole plan, the whole Bible, is in jeopardy.

We have several indications of this anger. He tells Moses "your people." The Hebrews have always been his people, his children. Now there's a distance. "*Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.*" They've corrupted themselves, and it didn't take too long. Corrupt is a serious word. Flawed to the core. No good. Not damaged. Not sick. Corrupt. You don't want corrupted files on your computer. *I have seen how stubborn and rebellious these*

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<sup>2</sup> Enns, 571

<sup>3</sup> If you look through 1 and 2 Kings, you'll keep finding Jeroboam all over the place. He was a bad king, and this sin of idol making, calf building was a huge problem.

*people are.* They are stubborn and rebellious. The word for this is stiff-necked. Bowed up. I see this in my son when he's really mad. He gets all tense, gnarls his lip up and glares. It is not the posture of repentance.

Your people. Corrupt. Quick to turn away. Stubborn. Rebellious. Stiff necked. God is angry and he is ready to judge. He is just to do so. After all that he has done, should be treated this way? No. His anger is righteous. *10 Now leave me alone so my fierce anger can blaze against them, and I will destroy them. Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation.*

See also that Moses is angry – “Moses’ anger burned hot.” Moses agrees with God. This is a travesty.

So Moses breaks the tablets, which is symbolic of God’s anger and of the people breaking the covenant with God. He is saying that if they are not prepared obey the law, they do not deserve to have it at all.

Then we start to see judgment, something we don’t like very much. Moses makes them pulverize and then drink the calf. We’re not sure all of the implications or reasons behind this, but it appears to be both total annihilation of the abomination and also a form of judgment upon the people. They have to drink what they have made. It was a part of them that brought this forth and it will go back to be a part of them. But in judgment not in health.

Next in judgment we see death. Moses asks, Who is on the Lord’s side? The Levites step up and somehow know who is to receive the judgment of death.<sup>4</sup> The Levites then put to death 3000 people. This is sad, but it is less than ½ of one percent. This was just. They deserved to die. Their lives were forfeit. And we mourn that sin damages us so much. Sin leads to death.

Though we don’t have the sword today like they did then, we do have church discipline. We are so used to lax rules and tolerance in our community that we are appalled when sin is even brought up in a specific way, much less dealt with. But church discipline is important for holiness. There should be no compromise with sin. Sin still leads to death.

God doesn’t like being treated this way. He is hurt. He never intended the people to only relate to him with the law, but we want them to love *him*.

You feel this way when you parents want you to be someone or something you’re not. They treat you according to an idea they have in their heads but not you. You feel this way when your boyfriend or girlfriend treats you according to an image and not you. You feel estranged. Unknown. Unloved. Because it’s wrong.

God is right to judge this sin for what it is. It is a break of the covenant the people just said they would observe, a break in the most serious of ways. What will happen?

### ***An Offer***

We’ve seen how God judges the sin of his people. He is serious about this. We’ll come back to how that is taken care of, but first we need to see one more part of the bad news. In 33:1-3, God gives an offer to the people. He has had a previous offer to Moses back in 32:10. Then he threw out the idea that he could start over with Moses. He could wipe out the people right there and go back to Genesis 12 and have a new Abraham. They could be the Mosesites. He could make a great nation out of Moses.

It might have been tempting. A new race. Not from Abraham, but from Moses. Don’t we all think that we have the right DNA, the right way of thinking, the best way to do things, and if everyone would just follow us the world would be a better place? We all think: If people would be more like *me* then the world would be a better place. But Moses rejects this offer.

In 33:1-3, God makes his second offer: *“The Lord said to Moses, “Get going, you and the people you brought up from the land of Egypt. Go up to the land I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I told them, ‘I will give this land to your descendants.’ 2 And I will send an angel before you to drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. 3 Go up to this land that flows with milk and honey. But I will not travel among you, for you are a stubborn and rebellious people. If I did, I would surely destroy you along the way.”*

People have pointed out that God is really offering the people what we all want. He is telling them that they can have an awesome life in the Promised Land. He will wipe out their enemies. They will be blessed and happy. But he won’t be with them. He’s not going. He’s cancelled his travel plans, but they’re free to go. This is the end of the road for him.

If we’re honest, this is what most of us want. We love all the blessings of God. We love all the benefits of salvation. We like to be loved and accepted. We like forgiveness. We like peace and joy. We like brothers and sisters. We just don’t like God there. If it weren’t for him, it would be great. That is really where most people are. They want the church without God.

And, remarkably, God makes exactly that offer. Would you take it? Isn’t God inconvenient?

God has made plans for his family to go to Disney World. At the airport, he gets to the plane and says this to his people. You go on without me. Here’s my credit card. Have a great trip. I don’t think it’s best if I go with you. Have fun without me. See you later.

What would you say? Disney World is an awesome place. I was there a few weeks ago. If I had an unlimited budget, I think I would have had even more fun. Would you go?

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<sup>4</sup> They might be exposed by the drinking ceremony (see Numbers 5:12-31)

### ***A Mediator***

God's people are in big trouble. The Bible might be over. God is really mad. Not just bent out of shape, but rightly mad. Don't think of him like a tyrant insisting that his people follow each and every rule to the letter or else they'll get kicked off the team. Instead, think of him as a jilted lover who had come home to find his wife in bed with another man. It is wrong. He is hurt. He is the good kind of jealous. God even mitigates against his wrath by offering this unfaithful wife her divorce papers. She can go ahead and go. He'll provide for her. Just go.

This is Moses at the cross-roads. He could take the offer of becoming the father of a new race. He could go on with the people, leaving them there.

But Moses steps up. The text seems to show God pushing Moses to do this very thing. Like all along God is moving and talking to Moses, knowing that he will figure it out. Waiting for him. But this is a real place where we see the personhood of God.

Moses swiftly and strongly deals with sin of his people. He comes down in anger, judging the people for their wrongdoing in their idolatry. He condemns their false worship. He rebukes Aaron. He makes sure the guilty are punished

The rebellion was put down. Allegiance was reclaimed. All was well. Except the holy god wasn't appeased. His wrath wasn't satisfied. He wanted to leave the people there, send them to Disney World without him going.

And, thankfully, the people didn't want that. Hooray. Signs of life. The people are waking up, seeing their sin and repenting. 33:4 *When the people heard these stern words, they went into mourning and stopped wearing their jewelry and fine clothes.* They can't make God go with them. They've decided they don't want to go to Disney World without God. And Moses won't go by himself to start over. *"If you don't personally go with us, don't make us leave this place."*

That's good. But they can't make him go. They're sorry. They repent. Please forgive me, they say.

What should they do? James Montgomery Boice imagines Moses going to bed wondering about what he might do to avert the wrath of God. He thinks. He prays. He thinks of the sacrifices of the patriarchs and the Passover. He knows that God will accept a substitute in the place of the death of a sinner. In the morning, God goes back up the mountain with determination. He talks with God in the tent of meeting, a place where he and God talk. It is extremely good for Israel that God has not cut off negotiations with Moses. He is their only link with God, and that relationship is on great terms. In fact, we read that Yahweh would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to a friend. This is remarkable access, unbelievable in its familiarity. This isn't Exodus 3, language of introduction. This is friendship.

In this tent, Moses rejects the offer of starting over with himself as the new and first patriarch. He rejects the offer of going ahead without God. And he begs for mercy for the people. Moses has argued with God before in chapters 3 and 4, but he has changed. This is different. He offers his life for the people. He offers to take the death penalty, to be the substitute so that the people can be forgiven and accepted again.

Unlike Aaron, Moses, as the representative of God's people, didn't minimize the sin. He offered no excuses, no defense on their own merits. He didn't argue that God's anger wasn't fair. He assumed Israelites were guilty, and that God had the right to wipe them out. This wasn't a real negotiation, because Moses was interceding for the guilty. He was asking God to save the ungodly. Moses appealed to God's fatherly affection, God's past involvement, God's public reputation, God's merciful compassion and God's everlasting covenant. He offered as a sacrifice of atonement. He'd been watching, noticing an listening. God needed blood to atone for sin. Moses offered his.

God says no. He says that in time it will be taken care of, the sin will be punished, but Moses cannot do it. We get a hint here that what Moses is asking isn't wrong, but that there is one coming who will be able to do just what he is asking.

God is pleased with Moses. What do you think about him? Do you think you need a Moses for you? Do you need a mediator? Do you need someone to speak for you before God? Or would you have taken the offer to go it alone without God? Where are you in this story? Are you God? No. Are you Moses? Most likely not. Statistically you aren't. There are thousands and thousands of others out there. Are you one of the ones judged for rebellion? What is your hope here? Is Moses speaking for you as your representative?

### ***Who is God?***

We see the peoples' sins. We see God's judgment. We hear Moses' cry for forgiveness. Is that all? Is there any hope? Yes. There is tremendous hope here, a hope that is in the gospel.

Moses intercedes for the people, and then he makes another request. Show me your glory. Moses wants some assurance that God really will go with them. Moses has been speaking with God face to face, but we understand that that wasn't a manifestation of God's full glory. Moses wanted more. He had seen God in the burning bush. He's seen his power on display in miracles and plagues. He had seen the Angel of Death come through the camp. He had followed God as a cloud and fire. He had gone up to the holy Mt. Sinai and received the law. But he wants more. More glory. And he wants it in writing. Whoa. Can Moses ask that? Apparently, on the basis of his relationship, he can.

So what does God do?

He says, I will make all my goodness pass before you. And we read the passage about God showing his back to Moses. He puts Moses in a place, on a rock, in the cleft of a rock, and shows him the train of his robe, which is all that Moses can stand.

His glory is his goodness. His glory is his weight. His glory is his mercy. *“And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”* His glory is in his goodness: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...”

When God wants Moses to know about him in this special way, he reveals to him all that Moses can handle and he tells him about himself. God is love and justice coming together. He is lovingkindness – hesed – which is justice and mercy coming together at the same moment.

Does he judge sin? Yes. He does. If you have a god who doesn’t judge sin, he is not god at all. God will not tolerate sin. But is he gracious? Yes. He loves people. He is relational, personal and forgiving, despite our many offenses.

How can that be?

If you are a Christian, you should see this coming. If you aren’t a Christian, then you have a problem with this text and with coming up with a result You’ll be forced to say: God shouldn’t be so hard-nosed about this. Or there is no such things as wrongs like this. Or that we should all just forgive each other and treat each other better.

But those don’t deal with the real issue. You don’t like to be treated with a wrong image. Why not? What do you do about it when it happens? How do you forgive?

Payment must be made for every offense. But Moses wasn’t able to offer it. He wasn’t a perfect person, not by any stretch. He was an awesome guy. He did a really good job. But he could only pay for his own sins.

We need a perfect sacrifice. That is pictured for us in the sacrificial system of the tabernacle, some of which we’ve already seen. Pictured though. Jesus fulfills this.

He stands in the place of his people. He is the perfect mediator. He has ascended the holy hill, made peace with God. He has taken the wrath of God so that we could be brought in and made right. He was forsaken by God, leaving God’s presence altogether for a time, so that we could have it eternally. He took the punishment for unfaithfulness so that we could be faithful.

Paul writes:

*2 Cor. 3:7 The old way, with laws etched in stone, led to death, though it began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses’ face. For his face shone with the glory of God, even though the brightness was already fading away. 8 Shouldn’t we expect far greater glory under the new way, now that the Holy Spirit is giving life? 9 If the old way, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new way, which makes us right with God! 10 In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new way. 11 So if the old way, which has been replaced, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new, which remains forever!*

*12 Since this new way gives us such confidence, we can be very bold. 13 We are not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so the people of Israel would not see the glory, even though it was destined to fade away. 14 But the people’s minds were hardened, and to this day whenever the old covenant is being read, the same veil covers their minds so they cannot understand the truth. And this veil can be removed only by believing in Christ. 15 Yes, even today when they read Moses’ writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand.*

*16 But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.*

We behold the glory of God when we look at Jesus. We see the goodness of God when we look at Christ and what he did for us. We wonder about how God can be perfectly just and perfectly forgiving and we only see how at the cross of Christ, the Savior of the world. We don’t need to construct idols in our lives. I John warns us of this in its very last verse. We have the image of God for us in Christ.

Do you feel like you have a lot of accommodating to do? Does it seem like God wants all kinds of things from you, demanding that you treat him the way he wants? What about me? Shouldn’t God come my way some? Isn’t that how a relationship works?

He does. God became a man. That is the ultimate in accommodating us. God made flesh. Jesus Christ gave up all he had to be with us. He is near. He is real. He is present. He is our mediator. He is our sacrifice. Do you want to see God, his goodness, his glory? Look to Christ. Make sure he alone resides first place in your life. Take your pictures and thoughts, your worship and your opinions of God seriously, making sure that they are what he wants them to be. See God in who he is for you, for his people, for his church. See him on the cross, forgiving your ways. Don’t go off today without him, taking his benefits without him. Reject that way of living. Live in the gospel today.

Who is the Rock of Ages that we hide ourselves in to see God? Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Our Savior.

We stand at one of Chesterton’s great cross-roads. Will you believe in this God? Or will you worship your own one?

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee; Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure; Save from wrath and make me pure.*

*Not the labor of my hands Can fulfill Thy law's demands; Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

*Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling; Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to Thee for grace; Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.*

*While I draw this fleeting breath, When mine eyes shall close in death, [originally When my eye-strings break in death] When I soar to worlds unknown, See Thee on Thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.*