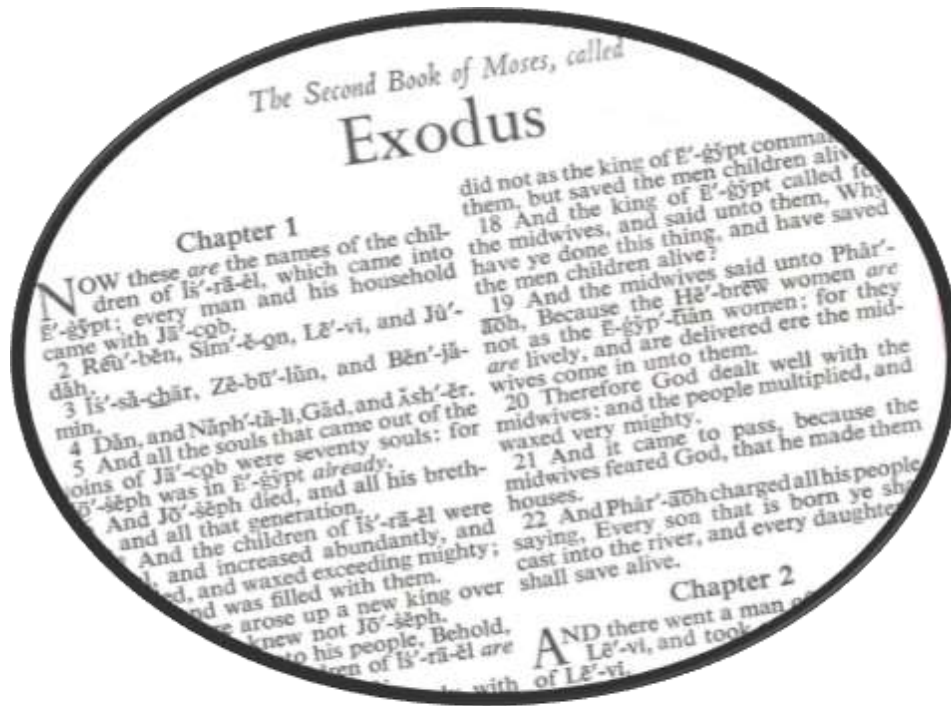


EXODUS – WEEK 22

THE GOLDEN DISASTER



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Exodus 32:7–33:6 – The Golden Disaster

The golden calf offends God and Moses greatly. Both execute dreadful judgments on Israel. Many Israelites die, and many more are blotted out from the book of life.

Worst of all, God won't be their guide anymore. Now an angel will lead them.

We're pleased to provide *the DEEP* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity in the Lord.

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Thank you.

Exodus 32:7–33:6 – The Golden Disaster
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1 Exodus 32:7-10 (ESV)

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!’” 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.”

God will relent from this plan – and He knows that he will – but this kind of talk is just chilling. It displays God’s perspective in a way that’s both frightening and humbling.

There are lots of adjectives we can use to describe people: fallen, sinful, selfish, greedy, stupid, violent, impulsive, illogical, angry, I could go on.

But here we see a ghastly new one – replaceable. We like to think that we’re unique, that the world would be lacking something without us. We derive some of our self-worth from this. We recoil from the idea that we are interchangeable.

The Bible speaks to our uniqueness.

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. – 1 Corinthians 12:20-24a

Yet, here God announces His willingness to wipe out the entire nation of Israel. He can *make a great nation* of Moses with a snap of His fingers. Why put up with these clowns? They’re not worth the work, especially given that they’re disposable.

This makes Jesus’s trip to the cross all the more surprising. God has options we don’t like to think about.

Being replaceable doesn’t interfere with our ability to glorify Him. One of the key ways we can do that is through “secret service” – performing low-profile tasks. Those are the little things that don’t get much attention. While we don’t notice them, God does. We usually only notice when something goes wrong.

So, remember to pray for the folks who do their works virtually in secret – things like clean up after Sunday school, prepare communion, work in the nursery, go on visitations, run sound in worship, etc.

Pick out one or two people who fill these vital but underappreciated shoes and lift them up for a special blessing. Ask God to encourage them and energize them.

And encourage them yourself.

2 Exodus 32:11-14 (ESV)

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.

Notice that Moses’ counter-argument has nothing to do with mercy or the suffering the people might endure; it’s all about God. His holiness and reputation are the whole point.

This is not to say that Moses doesn’t care about his people – and God often shows His mercy too – but that’s just not the main topic. Something more important is at issue.

This continues the ubiquitous, “it’s not about you,” theme of the Bible. Still, many people read the Bible and think it’s all about **our** getting into heaven. That’s because we, being people, have a people-centric point of view about everything. That’s understandable.

Imagine for a moment that the cows in India could understand Hinduism. Their cow-centric mentality might lead them to think that Hinduism is all about cows. It’s not, though cows do make out well. So it’s understandable that cows would over interpret this because they are, after all, cows.

We’re the same way. We think Christianity is all about getting people into heaven. This isn’t even particularly sinful; it’s just perspective bias. You have to pay attention first to the things that matter to you just to survive. When you drive, you think first about your safety. Other drivers matter, but their safety can’t be your primary focus. Sure, Christ calls us to great altruism, but normal survival thinking is how we’re wired.

We should remind ourselves often that it’s not all about us. Humble yourself before the LORD.

This all about a different perspective and a different way of living. At The Fellowship of Ailbe, we call this, “Practicing the Kingship of Jesus.”

We’re wired for self-preservation, but Christ calls us to Him as our Lord. Having a Lord doesn’t mean you lose your instinct for self-preservation; it just means the Lord is the first priority.

The classic conflict between the two is when we are called to not deny Him under pain of death. We’re not likely to have a test of faith like that though. Martyrdom isn’t part of modern American Christianity.

The problem is that we fail the little tests we do have. Growing beyond this weakness is the point of “practicing” the Kingship of Jesus. Only relentless attention and prayer can get us there.

3 Exodus 32:15-20 (ESV)

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. 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.

Now that’s a tantrum! Just imagine how intimidating Moses must have been to get those people to drink the water with the powder in it.

A couple of technical points are worth mentioning here. First off, many people think there were 5 commandments on each tablet. With apologies to Mel Brooks, each tablet actually had all 10 (written *on the front and on the back*). Like all legal contracts, there were two copies – one for each party. Eventually, we will see both copies placed in the ark, which is unusual and very significant.

Second, gold is three and a half times as heavy as iron. A solid gold calf big enough to be visible to Moses when *he came near the camp* would be so heavy, you’d need a forklift to move it.

So, unless the calf was small enough to fit in your pocket, it couldn’t have been solid gold. It must have been made of gold covered wood, or some other easily worked material like Styrofoam. Otherwise, Moses couldn’t have *burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it*. The powder was ashes and/or charcoal.

So Moses sees the calf and trashes the place. This is a magnificent precursor of Jesus clearing the temple in Matthew 21:12-13.

Righteous indignation is a thing of beauty.

As beautiful as righteous indignation is, it probably belongs in the “do not try this at home” category. Moses and Jesus have the gravitas to pull it off; we don’t.

So, what should we do when confronted with a situation that needs correction? Just sticking a cork in it can’t be right; that’s hiding our lamp under a bushel. What’s the right thing to do?

Clarity, not volume, is the key. Think strategically. If you just trigger a bunch of pushback, what have you accomplished? There’s usually no rush either. In that case, you have time to think, then say what needs to be said privately. Be winsome. Choose your words carefully, so that you cannot be misunderstood.

“Discretion is the perfection of reason, and a guide to us in all the duties of life.” – Walter Scott

4 Exodus 32:25-29 (ESV)

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.”

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. 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.”

Yes, Aaron really said, “*I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.*” That’s so goofy that it’s hard to imagine an adult talking like that. Most three-year-olds do about as well at making up excuses. Then they wonder why their parents are laughing when just seconds before they were angry.

Moses doesn’t even dignify Aaron’s silly comment with a response. He just ignores it and proceeds to execute a terrible judgment on Israel. Aaron has to watch this horror unfold – even participate in it – all the while having second thoughts about what he said to Moses.

Aaron tries to duck responsibility for the golden calf – deflecting the blame to the Israelites. Now Moses is having thousands of Israelites killed. How’s that working out for you, Aaron?

“O, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive!” – Walter Scott

In a way Aaron’s excuse worked perfectly; Moses isn’t blaming him at all. Instead he’s knocking off a bunch of Aaron’s friends and family.

This is one of the key ways that God mocks and humbles us; He’ll give us something we want just to show us how silly and misinformed we are. And this isn’t always some little thing like winning an auction bid for something you desire. You can end up in a job you hate because God said, “yes” to a fervent prayer. You can even marry the wrong person.

Never underestimate how important (and expensive!) sanctification can be. If God is willing to go to the cross over that, you’re not exempt from major pain – especially when He has big plans for you.

5 Exodus 32:30-35 (NIV)

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.”

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. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”

The LORD replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. 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.”

And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

Moses speaks to God of, “*the book you have written.*” What book?

This is only the fourth time the word “book” is used in the Bible and the other three refer to physical books that you can hold in your hands. This is something else.

Somehow this book is so obvious that Moses doesn’t need to explain or introduce it. It’s just “*the book you have written.*” The Bible goes on to mention this book many times. It’s “the book of life.”

May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous. – Psalm 69:28 (NIV)

So, the Israelites will be struck with a plague and some will be blotted out of the book of life. That sounds like a big deal but God has something bigger on His mind. He’s getting back to his original agenda – delivering Israel to the Promised Land. So, God tells Moses to focus on the main task and gives him the comforting detail that, “*my angel will go before you.*”

This is just a setback, not a game-changer.

We all have setbacks. They disrupt our hopes and dreams. They can even sow doubt.

Expect your faith to be attacked. It’s part of life and part of growing in Christ. In a sense, it’s a good sign. It’s like the adage coined by WWII B-17 pilots, “*The flak only gets heavy when you’re over the target.*”

Their point was to keep from losing focus just when they need it most. The moment of greatest danger is also the moment of greatest importance to the mission.

That’s the lesson for us when we’re under attack. Your first reaction to a setback should be concentration.

“Why is this happening?” “Is something up?” “What am I missing?” “What’s the point?” “What am I supposed to learn?” “How can I glorify God in this situation?”

If you believe that God is sovereign, then think like it.

6 Exodus 33:1-6 (ESV)

The LORD said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

Depending on your point of view, this latest punishment is either horrible or no big deal. God is still promising to get them to the Promised Land safely; He’s just not going to personally accompany them.

So, from a secular point of view, they’ll still get to the Promised Land same as before. But from a believer’s point of view they have lost the most valuable thing imaginable – God’s personal presence. To their credit, the people see this as a *disastrous word*. They repent, stripping themselves of their ornaments.

The English expression, “*So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you,*” doesn’t seem to make sense. Is God literally saying that unless they take off their ornaments, He’ll be unable to figure out what He should do with them?

Of course not; it’s a Hebrew colloquialism. But what does it mean?

We know that God’s command that the Israelites take off their ornaments, at least means they’re doing something with a purpose. Something must not be final. The only logical possibility is their punishment. Thus, we can back into the meaning of the colloquialism, “*So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.*”

It’s a quick show of obedience. Then He’ll decide whether to relent.

The Hebrew colloquialisms used when God declares a punishment often do not translate easily. When God declares He will do something, it’s not always as final in the original Hebrew as it sounds in English. He may yet relent. Repentance and prayer can still be appropriate (for example, see 2 Samuel 12:14-16.)

One of the great challenges for a Christian is to develop a heart of grace like the LORD’s. You don’t get this from practice, or study, or effort. Only supernatural transformation works. Ask God to transform you in this way. Think of a case where you are withholding forgiveness and ask Him to target that.

Don’t “try” to forgive the person; ask God to give you the ability.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What “little things” are more important to the church than people realize?
2. When is self-preservation in conflict with practicing the kingship of Jesus?
3. When has an attempt at giving righteous criticism backfired?
4. When have you had a prayer request granted, only to discover that this was a hard-knocks lesson?
5. When has a setback turned into a great lesson?
6. When have you failed at showing grace to someone?

Items for prayer: