

# EXODUS—WEEK 26

## GOD RELENTS



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is The Worship of the Golden Calf by Jan Havicksz Steen (1626–1679)  
on display at The North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC (!!)*

Israel’s sin is “off the charts” sinful. God has 3,000 of them killed and threatens to blot them out of the book of life.

The whole nation seems to be on the brink of annihilation. But Moses talks God out of it.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

T. M. Moore, Principal  
[tmmoore@ailbe.org](mailto:tmmoore@ailbe.org)

Thank you.

Exodus 32:21–33:17 — God Relents  
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1 Exodus 32:21–29 (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.

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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 getting a material possession you desire. You can end up in a job you hate because God said “yes” to a fervent prayer. You can even get into a bad marriage.

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 if He has big plans for you.

Great saints suffer greatly. You interested?

2 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.

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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—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.

## 3 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 well. When God declares He will do something, it’s not always as final in 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 just “try” to forgive the person; ask God to give you the ability.

## 4 Exodus 33:7–11 (NKJV)

*Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.*

Until the formal tabernacle is finished, Moses's tent will do. For now, it's the place to meet with God. Of course, if God doesn't relent from His declared punishment, there won't be many meetings and there won't be any need for the formal tabernacle. Israel is on the bubble, and Moses needs some serious facetime with the LORD to try and work this out.

Notice the high level of security. *Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp.* When Moses went to the tent, *each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle.* When he left, *his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.* The tent is well secluded and well-guarded. It looks like they're nervous.

Good. They should be. These are the ultimate closed-door meetings.

But Moses is the perfect guy to try and work this out. *The LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.* And when God showed up, the people did the right thing. *All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door.*

God will ultimately relent, but this is a killer of a wake-up call.

Speaking to God face-to-face would be paradise. We won't get that in this life, but we should long for it.

Every Christian prays. We're especially faithful when asking God for favors. Those prayers are okay, but a heart for prayer is a heart that seeks God's face.

This is why prayers for guidance are so powerful. When seeking the Lord's will in something, try bringing it up before Him and then get as quiet as you can. Concentrate on just listening. If you get distracted—I sure do—just keep trying. Come back to this prayer over and over until you get an answer.

Though this prayer can be magnificent, at some point you may get frustrated. That's okay. This should morph into long-term awareness. God's answer may come much later, when you least expect it.

This is often called “practicing the presence of God.” Seek His face always, and not just in prayer either.

## 5 Exodus 33:12–17 (ESV)

*Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?”*

*And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”*

Moses goes to bat for Israel and hits a home run. He starts off by simply stating the problem, but in a wonderfully personal way. Rather than saying straight up that God won’t be with them, he complains that, “*you have not let me know whom you will send with me.*”

He’s objecting to being led by a stranger! That’s why he then points out that God had said, “*I know you by name.*”

Then Moses asks for something that sounds off topic. Instead of asking for God to go with them, his request is, “*please show me now your ways.*” It implies God’s presence—if He’s not there, He can’t show Moses anything—but it has a personal feel. Moses wants God there, not for the material benefits, but so he can get to know Him better. He then caps this off with, “*Consider too that this nation is your people.*”

So God relents and says, “*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.*” Moses chooses that moment to say, “*If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.*” This is an odd time to say that; God just said He’s coming. Actually, this is just the Hebrew way of repeating something for emphasis. God’s presence is important to him. God responds in kind and reiterates His promise and reiterates why.

English communication avoids repetition; it feels clumsy and redundant. In Hebrew it’s common, especially for emphasis. This takes a little getting used to, but it has a certain poetic elegance.

Moses never even hints at arguing Israel’s goodness. He knows all too well that they are a stiff-necked people.

But Moses has a caring heart. He doesn’t admire them; he loves them.

This kind of caring heart is exactly the kind of heart Christians should strive to have. Ask the LORD to transform your heart so that you can love people who, for one reason or another, aren’t easy to love.

Ask Him to teach us to care about, and for, people we have overlooked.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. When have you had a prayer request granted, only to discover that it was a hard-knocks lesson?
2. When has a setback turned into a great lesson?
3. When have you failed at showing grace to someone?
4. Do you ever pray to know God better or to be closer to Him?
5. Is there something we can do to change our feelings for people we don't already love?