

A Daily Devotional on the Book of Exodus

By Ken Miller

WEEK 9 READING



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Fair-Weather Faith

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, 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.” ² So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁵ 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.” ⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. – Exodus 32:1-6 ESV

While Moses had been up on the mountaintop receiving the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant from God, he had left his brother, Aaron, in charge of the people down in the valley. The last they had seen of Moses was him ascending Mount Sinai into the dark storm cloud. The thunder, lightning, and earth-shaking signs that accompanied God’s presence at Sinai had left them terrified and unwilling to go anywhere near the mountain or its summit. They wanted nothing to do with Yahweh and were content to let Moses act as their proxy.

Then Moses climbed up the mountain, and the cloud covered it. And the glory of the Lord settled down on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from inside the cloud. To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the glory of the Lord appeared at the summit like a consuming fire. Then Moses disappeared into the cloud as he climbed higher up the mountain. He remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. – Exodus 24:15-18 NLT

During those 40 days and nights, the people of Israel began to wonder whether Moses was ever coming back. His long delay left them concerned about his safety and their own future. What would they do if Moses never came back? For all they knew, Moses had died on the mountaintop, a victim of Yahweh’s wrath.

It’s important to remember the sequence of events that precede chapter 32. God has already given Moses His laws and regulation, and Moses has shared them with the people. Not only that, the people expressed their eager willingness to obey all that God commanded.

Then Moses went down to the people and repeated all the instructions and regulations the Lord had given him. All the people answered with one voice, “We will do everything the Lord has commanded.” – Exodus 24:3 NLT

Following this corporate commitment to keep God’s laws, Moses wrote them all down for posterity (Exodus 24:4). Having completed his record of God’s commands, Moses “took the

Book of the Covenant and read it aloud to the people” and, once again, “they all responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has commanded. We will obey’” (Exodus 24:7 NLT). The people had heard every one of God’s commands and had agreed to keep them.

As part of the ceremony to inaugurate the institution of God’s laws, Moses offered blood sacrifices and sprinkled some of the blood on the people, telling them, “Look, this blood confirms the covenant the Lord has made with you in giving you these instructions” (Exodus 24:8 NLT). They had made a vow to obey all of God’s commands, and now that agreement had been sealed with blood, making it binding and carrying a penalty of death if they broke their commitment. This auspicious ceremony was then followed by a special invitation-only meal between some of the leadership of Israel and God Almighty.

Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel climbed up the mountain. There they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there seemed to be a surface of brilliant blue lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself. And though these nobles of Israel gazed upon God, he did not destroy them. In fact, they ate a covenant meal, eating and drinking in his presence! – Exodus 24:9-11 NLT

Then Moses was told to ascend back to the mountaintop where God promised to give a copy of the Ten Commandments written by His own hand.

“Come up to me on the mountain. Stay there, and I will give you the tablets of stone on which I have inscribed the instructions and commands so you can teach the people.” So Moses and his assistant Joshua set out, and Moses climbed up the mountain of God. – Exodus 24:12-13 NLT

Moses left Aaron and the elders of Israel in charge during his absence. These were the very same men who had been given the privilege of seeing the God of Israel and eating a covenant meal with Him. In sharing that meal with Yahweh, they had personally sealed their commitments to the covenant and pledged themselves to see that every law God had given was obeyed by the people of Israel.

What happens next is critical. According to chapter 24, Moses returned to the top of Mount Sinai, “And the glory of the Lord settled down on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from inside the cloud. To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the glory of the Lord appeared at the summit like a consuming fire. Then Moses disappeared into the cloud as he climbed higher up the mountain. He remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights” (Exodus 24:16-18 NLT).

This brings us to the events recorded in chapter 32. At the end of the 40 days, “When the Lord finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, written by the finger of God.” (Exodus 31:18 NLT).

Moses left the mountaintop with the God-inscribed copy of the Decalogue and all the instructions regarding the construction of the Tabernacle and the establishment of the priesthood. His arms and his mind were full of the divinely revealed will of God for the people of Israel. It is essential to understand that Moses was coming down from the mountain with not only the Ten Commandments but the plans for the Tabernacle, the house within which God's presence was to dwell among the people. God had made a commitment to live among His chosen people in a house that they could construct with their own hands and pay for with their own resources.

But all that God had shared with Moses regarding the Tabernacle stands in direct opposition to what was taking place down in the valley. In Moses' absence, the people began to have second thoughts about Yahweh. They were well aware of His commands and had heard every one of the regulations contained in the Book of the Covenant. They had even given their hearty approval and voiced their full commitment to living their lives according to God's law.

But it took just over a month for the people of Israel to lose all their enthusiasm. The longer Moses delayed, the more they began to have second thoughts about everything. In their minds, Moses was Yahweh's official representative and spokesperson. If Moses wasn't coming back, their link to Yahweh would be broken. After all, it had been Moses who showed up in Egypt with news of their deliverance by the hand of Yahweh. And Moses had been the one to lead them out of Egypt and into the wilderness with the help of his God. But with Moses apparently gone, they began to question Yahweh and all the commitments they had made to Him.

When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. "Come on," they said, "make us some gods who can lead us. We don't know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt." – Exodus 32:1 NLT

With Moses out of the picture, the people turned to Aaron. At this point, Aaron had no concept of God's plans regarding the Tabernacle and his future role as the high priest. That information resided with Moses and he had not yet returned to share it. So, when the people came to Aaron and expressed their desire to replace Yahweh with another god, he eagerly obliged them.

"Take the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters, and bring them to me." – Exodus 32:2 NLT

Little did Aaron know that he was taking what belonged to Yahweh and ordering it to be used for idolatry. He was unaware that God had given Moses a very different use for the resources of the people of Israel.

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and

bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.” – Exodus 25:1-9 NLT

Aaron ordered the people to donate their gold earrings to construct an idol that was intended to replace Yahweh. This false god would take the place of the one true God. And in carrying out the will of the people, Aaron violated the very first commandment of the Decalogue.

“You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods.” – Exodus 20:3-5 NLT

And the man who oversaw the construction of this false god was the one whom God had chosen to serve as the high priest of Israel.

Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded it into the shape of a calf. – Exodus 32:4 NLT

God had great plans for Aaron and the people of Israel. They had no way of knowing that Moses was on his way down the mountain with God’s blueprints for the Tabernacle and His plans for the atoning work of the priesthood. The creator of heaven and earth was getting ready to take up residence among them, and yet they were busy replacing Him with a false god of their own design. And when Aaron had completed the construction of the golden calf and its accompanying altar, the people exclaimed, “O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:4 NLT).



Buoyed by the people’s enthusiasm, Aaron declared a feast for the following day so that the people might worship their newfound god. And sadly, the text records that “The people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry” (Exodus 32:6 NLT).

Don’t miss the irony in all of this. Moses was coming down the mountain with all the details concerning the Tabernacle, the priesthood, and the sacrificial system. He had the plans for the Bronze Altar and directions for how the people might receive atonement and cleansing

for their sins. But before his feet could reach the valley floor, the people of Israel had decided to come up with a plan of their own. It took just 40 days for the Israelites to forget Yahweh and every commitment they had made to Him. In their minds, He had always been Moses' God and not their own. So, when Moses failed to return, they seized the opportunity to seek and serve another god.

An Appeal to God's Faithfulness

⁷ And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸ 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!'" ⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ 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? ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.'" – Exodus 32:7-13 ESV

God knew something to which Moses was completely oblivious. For 40 days and nights, Moses had been sequestered at the top of Mount Sinai where he had just received God's plans for the Tabernacle and instructions for commissioning his brother, Aaron, as the high priest. But while Moses had been away, things had taken a decidedly dark turn down in the valley. His brother, under pressure from the people, had decided to play the role of a priest over his very own religion with its very own god.

Moses had just taken down all the details concerning the construction of God's house, an elaborate sanctuary designed to be Yahweh's throneroom on earth. This sacred structure was to be His self-designed dwelling place among the people of Israel.

"...let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it." – Exodus 25:8-9 ESV

But along with the plans for the Tabernacle, God had given Moses instructions regarding the investiture of Aaron and his sons as priests.

"...bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar." – Exodus 28:1 ESV

These men had been divinely chosen to serve as mediators between Yahweh and the people of Israel, ministering on their behalf in the Tabernacle. To accentuate the sacred nature of their

new role, God ordained the creation of distinctive garments that would set them apart as holy and serve as reminders of their sanctified status as priests.

But, unbeknownst to Moses, Aaron was already serving as a priest by offering sacrifices to the golden calf idol he had commissioned. Not only that, he had declared a holy day on which the people would honor their new god with sacrifices and a raucous celebration that included plenty of feasting and drinking. And, as if this wasn't bad enough, the people "rose up to play" (Exodus 32:6 ESV). The Hebrew phrase can be translated as "they stood up to laugh, mock, or play."

They had sat down to eat a meal but followed it with dancing and celebration. And this imagery of a feast is significant because it ties directly to the meal that Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel had shared together in the presence of God.

Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel climbed up the mountain. There they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there seemed to be a surface of brilliant blue lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself. And though these nobles of Israel gazed upon God, he did not destroy them. In fact, they ate a covenant meal, eating and drinking in his presence! – Exodus 24:9-11 NLT

That remarkable moment in time was meant to seal the covenant that God had made with the people of Israel. Those leaders had been privileged to break bread with Yahweh Himself and that memorable event was intended to ratify their agreement to obey the commands of God. They served as representatives of the people and their presence before God affirmed what the people had agreed to do.

"All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." – Exodus 24:7 ESV

And yet, those very same men were part of the crowd that was feasting and playing in celebration of their newfound god. They rose up from another covenant meal and worshiped an altogether different god. In doing so, they broke the covenant they had made with Yahweh. They violated the very commands they had pledged to keep. And God was not happy.

"How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live! They have melted down gold and made a calf, and they have bowed down and sacrificed to it. They are saying, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.'" – Exodus 32:8 NLT

Even God appears stunned by how quickly the people turned their backs on Him. But He wasn't surprised or caught off guard. In His omniscience, God knew that the people of Israel would prove unfaithful and incapable of keeping His commands. His description of them as "a stiff-necked people" (Exodus 32:9 ESV) is not a statement of revelation. It is not as if He just discovered that fact, but He has known all along. From the moment He chose to deliver them

from their captivity in Egypt, He knew they would prove to be a stubborn and rebellious people, and they had proven that fact every step of the way from Goshen to Sinai.

These people had a habit of murmuring and complaining. They had a track record of ingratitude and dissatisfaction with God's way of doing things. And now, they had topped off their not-so-subtle attitude of rebellion by dismissing Yahweh altogether. They dumped their Deliverer and replaced Him with a god of their own making. And describes their actions in highly unflattering terms.

“Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.” – Exodus 32:7 ESV

The Hebrew word, תַּחַטֵּי (šāḥat), carries the idea of decay, spoilage, or ruin. The actions of the people of Israel had made them unacceptable in the eyes of God. They had made themselves impure and morally reprehensible to a holy God. In a word, they defiled themselves, and God held them personally responsible.

This led God to reveal to Moses His plan for dealing with their blatant display of apostasy.

“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.” – Exodus 32:10 NLT

This statement was intended to let Moses know just how serious this situation was. God was so offended that He was willing to start from scratch, and this would not have been the first time. When the sins of mankind had reached a fever pitch during the days of Noah, God had chosen to begin again by destroying every human being but Noah and his immediate family. But even with a new start, humanity continued to display its propensity for rebellion and godlessness. That led God to choose Abram, a pagan from the land of Ur, through whom He started a brand new nation that eventually became the people of Israel.

But the Israelites had displayed their hand. Even after God had rescued them from their captivity in Egypt and pledged to make His divine presence a permanent part of their community, they turned their backs on Him. So, God informed Moses that He was willing to start all over again. He would reboot the system once again; this time allowing Moses to play the role of Abraham.

Moses had to have been shocked by what God told him. He too must have been angered by this latest news of his people's rebellion. Moses must have been appalled by Aaron's role in the whole affair. But rather than embrace God's plan to start over, Moses intervened. He interceded on behalf of his rebellious people and begged God to reconsider.

“O Lord!” he said. “Why are you so angry with your own people whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such great power and such a strong hand? Why let the Egyptians say, ‘Their God rescued them with the evil intention of slaughtering them in the

mountains and wiping them from the face of the earth'? Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you have threatened against your people!" – Exodus 32:11-12 NLT

Moses appealed to God's faithfulness and reminded Him of His own reputation. The last thing God would want is for the nations of the world to view His actions in a negative light. For God to destroy the people of Israel now would send the wrong message and portray Him as unfaithful and untrustworthy. Yahweh would come across as just another fickle, revenge-minded deity who viewed human beings as nothing more than pawns in some kind of divine game of chance.

Moses reminded Yahweh of the covenant He had made with the patriarchs of Israel.

"Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You bound yourself with an oath to them, saying, 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And I will give them all of this land that I have promised to your descendants, and they will possess it forever.'" – Exodus 32:13 NLT

In all of this, Moses was revealing his understanding of God's nature and his awareness of the bigger picture concerning the people of Israel. They were on their way to the land that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That was the destination and it was all part of the sovereign strategy that God had put in place centuries earlier. This moment in the wilderness was just a phase in the long-established plan of God and should not be allowed to deter or derail what God had ordained.

Moses was revealing his growing sense of trust in the promises of God. There had been times along the way when he had been ready to give up and go home. The constant complaining of the people had gotten on his nerves and tempted him to throw in the towel. But he was learning to trust in the will of God and to view the ups and downs of life as part of His divine plan. The Egyptians had been no problem for God. The lack of water in the wilderness and the Israelite's diminishing supply of bread had not thrown a wrench into God's plan. And as far as Moses could see, their blatant display of rebellion should pose no threat to God's providential plan either. Yahweh was far too faithful to let this incident prevent His sovereign will from being done.

Moses knew that God was great. He was well aware of God's holiness and transcendence. He was intimately familiar with God's power. But he had also grown to understand God's unwavering faithfulness. With the plans for the Tabernacle in his hands, Moses longed to see it take form in the valley below so that the people might know and experience the joy of God's presence. So, he went to the mat with God and urged Him to display His faithfulness once again – in a big way.

Sin in the Camp

¹⁴ *And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*

¹⁵ *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. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." ¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. – Exodus 32:14-20 ESV*

Did Moses really change the mind of God? Was his intercession on behalf of the people the reason "the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people" (Exodus 32:14)? It would appear from the text that Moses was successful in persuading God to spare the people of Israel from His wrath. But this conclusion would stand in direct contrast to other passages in the Bible that teach of God's immutability or unchanging nature.

"For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed." – Malachi 3:6 ESV

In this passage from the book of Malachi, God was declaring His intentions to judge His people for their apostasy, but He would not completely destroy them because He had made a covenant promise and was going to fulfill it.

In the New Testament, James picks up on this theme when he writes:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. – James 1:17 ESV

God is consistent in character and action. He doesn't say one thing and then do another; a fact that is recorded in the book of Numbers.

*God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? – Numbers 23:19 ESV*

God had made a covenant commitment to Abraham, that He would produce from him a great nation and one day give them the land of Canaan as their inheritance.

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” – Genesis 17:7-8 ESV

And over the centuries, God reiterated and reconfirmed that covenant to Abraham’s descendants, all the way down to Moses and the people of Israel whom He had freed from captivity in Egypt. When God had commissioned Moses to be the deliverer of the people of Israel, He told him, “I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17 ESV). God made a commitment and He was going to keep it.

So, what did God mean when He said to Moses, “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” (Exodus 32:10 ESV)? Was He lying? Did He not mean what He said?

When reading a passage like this one, it is essential to consider the participants in the conversation. God was speaking to Moses, His chosen servant. This was an intimate conversation between the Lord and the man He had selected to lead His people out of captivity and all the way to the land of Canaan. Nothing about what happened in the valley had surprised God or caught Him off-guard. When He described the Israelites as “a stiff-necked people” (Exodus 32:9 ESV), He was not stating a fact He had just discerned from their most recent activity. He had known it all along, and Moses was also well aware of their stubborn disposition.

This entire exchange between God and Moses was meant to be a test – of Moses. God knew what had happened in the Israelite camp. Because of His omniscience and omnipresence, He had witnessed all that they had done to reject Him as their God. But Moses had been completely unaware of the sordid scene going on in the valley until God had informed him, and he had still not seen the extent of Israel’s wickedness with his own eyes.

Notice the wording of God’s statement to Moses. He places the burden on Moses when He says, “therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them” (Exodus 32:10 ESV). In other words, God informs Moses that the fate of the Israelites is in his hands. God doesn’t say He is going to destroy them. He states that their destruction will come if Moses fails to intercede. And God knew the outcome before Moses did. Because of His omniscience, God knew exactly what Moses was going to do, even before Moses did.

And it is essential to note how Moses responded to God. He reminded the Lord of His power, faithfulness, reputation, and His covenant commitment. But God didn’t need a primer on His character or a pep talk about remaining faithful to His promises. This was a test to see if Moses fully understood the vast gap between the graciousness and goodness of God and the sinfulness of his own people. Because Moses was about to get a wake-up call concerning the

moral and spiritual poverty of the people of Israel when he walked back into their camp. He would discover just how evil and worthy of God's wrath they really were.

God was preparing Moses for the worst. He knew His servant was in for the shock when the full extent of Israel's sinfulness became apparent. So, when Moses interceded and appealed to God's faithfulness and reminded Him of His covenant commitment, it revealed that Moses understood that Israel's future was fully dependent upon God's mercy. They were incapable of living up to God's holy requirements, and the only thing that kept God from destroying them was His mercy, grace, and commitment to keep His covenant promises.

The following insights from Philip Graham Ryken shed light on this difficult passage.

"It was never God's purpose to destroy the Israelites, but only to save them. Even as he threatened wrath, there were hints that he would show mercy. First there was the simple fact that God commanded Moses to go down. If he really intended to destroy the Israelites, then why send Moses down at all? The answer is that he was planning to save them through the intercession of their mediator. The Israelites had not sinned themselves outside the grace of God. He was sending Moses to pray for their forgiveness.

Then there is the fact that God refers to the Israelites as the people of Moses: 'Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt...' (Exod. 32:7). By talking this way, God was showing that the people were alienated from him by their sin. If they were going to make a cow and say, 'These are your gods, O Israel!' (v. 4b), then God was going to say to Moses, 'these are your people.' But he was not trying to shift the blame. Rather, he was helping Moses identify with the Israelites. There is a sense in which they were his people. Moses was their spiritual representative." – Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus*

From Moses' perspective, it appeared as if God relented or changed His mind. Moses fully expected God to destroy the people of Israel because they deserved it. But rather than rain down judgment on His disobedient people, God sent Moses down the mountain carrying the two tablets containing His laws. In his arms, Moses held the Decalogue, but his mind was weighed down by all the details concerning the plans for God's house and the installation of the priesthood. This poor man must have been confused and conflicted as he made his way down the mountain with Joshua, his companion. And when the camp of Israel came into sight, Moses was appalled by what he saw. It was worse than he could have imagined.

...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. – Exodus 32:19 ESV

In a fit of rage, Moses destroyed the two tablets containing God's law. This is the same man who dared to ask God, "does your wrath burn hot against your people?" (Exodus 32:11 ESV). He had the audacity to advise God, "Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people" (Exodus 32:12 ESV). But now, having gotten a first-hand look at the

magnitude of the problem, Moses was so angry that he broke the two tablets upon which God had engraved the Ten Commandments.

The people had been violating God's laws, but in his anger, Moses actually destroyed the laws of God. In a sense, Moses acted out the entire problem with the law and Israel's licentiousness. The law was never going to hold back their propensity for sin. In fact, Paul states that the purpose behind the law was never to irradicate sin, but to reveal it.

...its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are. – Romans 3:19-20 NLT

And since Moses had already relayed God's laws to the people of Israel, they were without excuse. They knew that what they were doing was in violation of God's laws, but they did it anyway. They willingly disregarded God's commands. Not only that, they blatantly disregarded God Himself by making false gods meant to replace Him.

But in his white-hot anger, Moses destroyed the golden calf, burning it with fire and grinding what was left into a fine powder that he mixed with water and forced the people to drink. The people had been consumed by their own sin; now they were forced to consume their sin in the form of the foul-tasting concoction that Moses whipped up. There is no explanation given for this strange disciplinary action. But it must have left a powerful impression on the people as they gagged down the idol-laced water and considered the weight of their sin. But despite the distasteful nature of their judgment, it didn't take long before the excuses began to flow and the blame game began. No one wanted to take responsibility for what had happened. But while God would not destroy the people of Israel, He would bring judgment against them. They would pay dearly for their sins and learn a painful lesson regarding the gravity of failing to obey God.

The Painful Process of Purging

²¹ And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” ²² And Aaron said, “Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. ²³ 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.’ ²⁴ 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.”

²⁵ And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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.’” ²⁸ And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. ²⁹ 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.” – Exodus 32:21-29 ESV

As soon as Moses and Joshua arrived back in the Israelite camp, Moses made a beeline for Aaron. He must have been beside himself with confusion and consternation as he considered how his brother had let this happen. While Moses had been up on the mountain, he had left Aaron in charge, and had told the elders of Israel, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them” (Exodus 24:14 ESV). Now, Moses had practically run back down the mountain after hearing God’s report of all that had happened in his absence.

“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...” – Exodus 32:7-8 ESV

God never implicated Aaron, but Moses needed to know how any of this could have happened without his brother’s knowledge or consent. So, as soon as he saw Aaron, Moses demanded an explanation.

“What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” – Exodus 32:21 ESV

Moses didn’t pull any punches or give his brother the benefit of the doubt. He seemed to know that Aaron was responsible for what had happened, and Aaron’s response speaks volumes.

“Don’t get so upset, my lord,” Aaron replied. “You yourself know how evil these people are. They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will lead us. We don’t know what happened to

this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt.’ So I told them, ‘Whoever has gold jewelry, take it off.’ When they brought it to me, I simply threw it into the fire—and out came this calf!’ – Exodus 32:23-24 NLT

Aaron didn’t deny complicity, but he did try to absolve himself of any responsibility. He admitted that he played a role in the debacle, but painted himself as an unwilling and unwitting participant. He claimed to be an innocent victim of mob rule. These “evil people” pressured him into taking part in their wicked scheme. He had no other choice.

Aaron appealed to his brother’s own history of dealing with the Israelites. If anyone could understand what it was like to deal with these stubborn people, it would be Moses. After all, they had given him a run for his money on more than one occasion. Aaron somehow believed that Moses would excuse his actions by placing all the burden of guilt on the people. Surely Moses would absolve his own brother of any responsibility once he recognized that Aaron had been forcefully coerced by the unruly Israelites.

But Aaron’s excuse lacked any hint of transparency or believability. It was filled with half-truths and cleverly worded alibis designed to mitigate responsibility and avoid judgment. Aaron was fairly accurate when detailing the people’s demand that he make them an idol, and he made sure to place part of the blame on Moses for having been AWOL for 40 days. In a sense, he was saying that none of this would have happened if Moses had simply stayed in the camp.

This whole exchange between Aaron and his brother is a classic example of passing the buck. Aaron knew he was guilty, but he was desperate to transfer as much of the blame as possible onto the people. And since there were far too many witnesses who could corroborate his role in fashioning the golden calf, Aaron decided to fabricate a far-fetched tale to explain its sudden appearance. He admitted to taking up the collection of gold from the people but made it sound like he did so as some kind of tax or penalty for their unjust demand. When Aaron tossed their gold into the fire to destroy it, the golden calf miraculously came out of the flames. In other words, it just appeared – like magic.

This wild claim stood in direct contradiction to the facts. When the people demanded that Aaron make them a god to replace Yahweh, he responded, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me” (Exodus 32:2 ESV). And when they had done so, “he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf” (Exodus 32:4 ESV).

In an effort to protect himself, Aaron lied to his brother and to God. He blatantly misrepresented the facts in an effort to paint himself in the best possible light. But Moses saw through his brother’s subterfuge.

Moses saw that Aaron had let the people get completely out of control, much to the amusement of their enemies. – Exodus 32:25 NLT

This statement stresses the fact that, even with the idol destroyed, the people were still running around in a state of wild abandon. Their “revelry” had not abated, even after Moses melted down their idol, pulverized the gold, mixed it with water, and forced them to drink it. The moral mayhem continued and Moses held his brother completely responsible for it. To make matters worse, news of Israel’s debauchery spread to the other nations in the area. Reports of this party in the wilderness of Sinai circulated far and wide, leaving Israel a veritable laughing stock among their enemies. The so-called people of Yahweh had abandoned their great deity for a golden calf, and now there were dancing around in the wilderness like a bunch of drunk adolescents who gained access to their parent’s liquor cabinet. Even their pagan neighbors saw their actions as reprehensible and unacceptable.

But Moses had seen enough. He knew something had to be done, so he called for reinforcements. At this point in the narrative, Moses displays a holy vengeance for the Lord’s reputation. Having seen the extent of the wickedness that had taken place in his absence, Moses knew that he had to intervene. God had been justly angry about the situation in the camp and now Moses shared that anger.

Moses called on all those who remained faithful to the Lord to join him, and the tribe of Levi stepped forward. Then Moses commissioned them for the purging and purifying work that God had in store for 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.’” – Exodus 32:27 ESV

While Aaron had tried to make light of what had happened, Moses knew that this situation was going to require drastic measures. God had given him a plan for mitigating the damage done by the people’s actions and it was going to be painful and permanent in nature. The guilty were going to pay for their sins with their lives.

When men of the tribe of Levi stepped forward when Moses issued his call, they had no idea what was going to be required of them. They had demonstrated their zeal for the Lord by answering Moses’ call, but now they were going to have to prove their faithfulness by striking down all those within the camp who had played a role in the rebellion. And, as a result of their efforts, more than 3,000 men of Israel paid for their apostasy with their lives.

It would seem that God called for the deaths of all those who had played a leadership role in the uprising. Many more were guilty of participating in the idolatry and immorality that accompanied it. But God was interested in dealing with those who had instigated the whole affair. And for their role in the purging, the tribe of Levi was given a special commendation.

“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.” – Exodus 32:29 ESV

Because they had declared their allegiance to God and were willing to do the dirty work of protecting the integrity of His name, God rewarded them with the honor of serving as priests and servants. The Levites had stood by their kinsman, Moses, and had taken up arms against all those who dared to abandon their God. They were honored for their commitment to God by being given the privilege of serving Him as shepherds over the people. By executing the 3,000 ringleaders, they had actually spared God's people from further apostasy. They had purged the evil from their midst. But God was not yet done. The instigators had paid for their crime with their lives, but all those who had gladly followed their lead would also face God's judgment.

No Atonement Available

³⁰ The next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” ³¹ So Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” ³³ But the Lord said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. ³⁴ But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.”

³⁵ Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made. – Exodus 32:30-35 ESV

It is easy to overlook the gravity of the situation that had taken place in the valley below Mount Sinai. The people of Israel had done far more than order the creation of a false god that they might worship. Their little festal celebration was far much more than a party to commemorate their new deity. It was all blatant rejection of God Almighty and a patent refusal to keep the commitments they had made to Him. They had made a conscious decision to turn their backs on Yahweh and renege on their vows to obey His laws.

But God took their actions as a direct affront to His sovereignty and as a willful violation of the gracious covenant He had made with the people of Israel.

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” – Exodus 19:5-6 ESV

And on two separate occasions, the people had responded to God’s call to covenant faithfulness by making a corporate oath to obey.

“All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” – Exodus 19:8 ESV

“All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” – Exodus 24:3 ESV

But their actions spoke louder than their words. While Moses had been up on Mount Sinai receiving God’s plans for the Tabernacle, the people had grown restless. His absence had left them with a leadership void and a growing sense of dissatisfaction with their nomadic lifestyle in the wilderness. Despite God’s ongoing provision for all their needs, they were wrestling with discontentment and disappointment over their circumstances. They had yet to fully accept Yahweh as their God. They viewed Him as a distant deity who resided among the thunder, lightning, smoke, and fire that covered Mount Sinai. They feared Him but did not yet revere Him. They understood Him to be powerful and potentially dreadful but did not view Him as relational.

What makes their predicament so precarious is that they stood before God as guilty of having violated two of the primary commands that had been written by the finger of God on the tablets of stone that now lay shattered on the valley floor. God had clearly prohibited their worship of any other God but Him.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” – Exodus 20:3 ESV

This was not an optional clause in the covenant. It was a command that completely ruled out the worship of any other gods but Yahweh. And to make sure the people understood the nature of this restriction, God provided further clarification.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me...” – Exodus 20:4-5 ESV

And yet, what had they done? In Moses’ absence, they had grown impatient and decided that these laws were no longer applicable or amenable to them. Incited by a group of disgruntled malcontents, the people demanded that Aaron provide them with a new god to replace the one that Moses had introduced them to.

“Up, 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.” – Exodus 32:1 ESV

During their long stay in Egypt, they had grown accustomed to the concept of a plurality of gods. In fact, they had adopted many of those gods as their own (Joshua 24:14-15). So, the idea of worshiping one God was new to them. And this God of Moses had proven to be a particularly difficult deity to embrace because He was invisible and seemingly unapproachable. By demanding that Aaron manufacture a new god, they were hedging their bets. They were hoping he could produce a second or third option when it came to divine assistance.

But Moses understood the gravity of their sin. He had heard the voice of God stating His divine displeasure with His people.

“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.” – Exodus 32:9-10 ESV

Now, as he stood before his brother and the surviving members of the Israelite nation, Moses warned them that they were not out of the woods yet. The execution of the ringleaders had not solved their problem.

“You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” – Exodus 32:30 ESV

What is amazing to consider is that Aaron was still alive. Moses had demanded his death along with the rest of the men who had instigated the rebellion. Even though Aaron had given in to their demands and had fabricated the false god, he had been spared death. This is likely linked to Moses’ understanding that Aaron had been set apart by God to serve as the future high priest of Israel. But although Aaron was alive, he was far from guiltless.

As the mediator for God’s people, Moses headed back up the mountain to intercede on their behalf before Yahweh. He entered again into God’s presence as the people stood in the valley below, waiting to hear what the verdict would be. Moses had left them in a state of anxious insecurity, having indicated his own doubts concerning the outcome of his efforts.

“...perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” – Exodus 32:30 ESV

He would do his best, but he could not assure the people that God would forgive them for their actions.

Once he arrived back at the summit, Moses addressed his concerns to God in the form of an ultimatum.

“Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” – Exodus 32:31-32 ESV

Moses seems to bargain with God. He confesses the sins of the people and knows that they deserve death for what they have done, but he pleads for God to forgive them. If God, in His righteous judgment, should refuse to forgive, Moses asks that God absolve him of all responsibility for the people. By asking that he be blotted out of God’s “book,” it appears that Moses is asking for a premature death. He would rather die than have to watch the divine annihilation of his fellow Israelites. By referencing this “book,” Moses is likely indicating his belief in a divine record of all living humans. Moses preferred death to life if God was not going to forgive the people of Israel. He knew that God had every right to mete out justice and judgment upon His rebellious people. But Moses longed for forgiveness.

God responded to Moses’ request with a declaration of His intent.

“Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.” – Exodus 32:33 ESV

Moses would not die. God was not going to punish Moses for the sins of the people. But He would hold responsible all those who had willingly joined in the rebellion. They would pay with their lives. And God chose to punish the guilty with a plague. He brought upon them the same kind of judgment He had used against the nation of Egypt. We are not told the nature of the

plague, but it is clear that God poured out His wrath on the guilty. He did not accept Moses' offer to serve as a substitute for their sins. Moses could not offer atonement with his life because he too was a sinner. Those who were guilty would have to atone for their own sins with their own lives. But not all died because not all had participated in the rebellion.

God instructed Moses to continue his role of leading the people. He had a job to do and God had a promise to fulfill. The rest of the people of Israel would continue their journey to Canaan and one day cross over into the Jordan River into the promised land.

"...now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you." – Exodus 32:34 ESV

God would be faithful to His covenant. But for all those who had chosen to break the covenant with God, they would pay dearly.

"Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." – Exodus 32:34 ESV

The Loss of God's Presence

¹ *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.' ² 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. ³ 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."*

⁴ *When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. ⁵ 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.'"* ⁶ *Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.*

⁷ *Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. ⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. ⁹ When 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. ¹⁰ And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. ¹¹ Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. – Exodus 33:1-11 ESV*

Israel's ill-advised decision to abandon God proved to be far more costly than they could ever have imagined. Three thousand of their own kinsmen died as a result of their leadership role in the rebellion, while an undisclosed number of other Israelites lost their lives in the plague that God sent among them. These divine judgments must have left the people of Israel in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Had God's wrath been satisfied or were more deaths to be expected? And would they be next? Yet the greatest judgment was yet to come, and it would appear in an unexpected form.

God commanded Moses to break camp and begin the next phase of the journey to Canaan. Their time at Sinai was complete. They had the Decalogue, the Book of the Covenant, and God's plans for the Tabernacle. Now, it was time to complete their quest for the promised land. But notice how God changed how He referenced the people of Israel. He told Moses to depart and to take "the people you brought up from the land of Egypt" (Exodus 33:1 ESV). He no longer refers to them as His "treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5 ESV). Rather than "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6 ESV), they are simply "the people" whom Moses brought out of Egypt. Their decision to abandon God has dramatically altered their relationship with Him.

God will keep the covenant promise He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Canaan will become the Israelite's homeland, and to bring that outcome about, God will drive out all the inhabitants who currently occupy the land. He promises to send an angel ahead of them, who will "drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites" (Exodus 33:2 ESV). But the announcement about this divine agent is markedly different that what God had told them prior to their debacle with the golden calf.

"Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him." – Exodus 23:20-21 ESV

Earlier, God had promised to send His angel to accompany them on their way to Canaan. He was to guide and guard them as they traveled. But the angel's presence had come with conditions.

"But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries." – Exodus 23:22 ESV

And God had told them that their conquest of Canaan would require the destruction of all the inhabitants, the elimination of every idol, and complete allegiance to Him.

"When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. You shall serve the Lord your God..." – Exodus 23:23-25 ESV

But the people's rejection of God at Sinai proved to be catastrophic and in ways that were completely unexpected and unnerving. God informed Moses, "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" (Exodus 33:3 NLT).

And God had Moses command the people to remove all their fine clothes and expensive jewelry. They would no longer be allowed to adorn themselves with the trinkets and treasures they had brought with them from Egypt. This prohibition seems to have direct ties to Aaron's request for the Israelites to donate all their gold earrings so that he could make them a false god (Exodus 32:2-3). God wanted nothing to do with their fancy ornaments and fine clothing because they served as reminders of their rejection of Him. So, he told them, "You are a stubborn and rebellious people. If I were to travel with you for even a moment, I would destroy you. Remove your jewelry and fine clothes while I decide what to do with you" (Exodus 33:5 NLT). And this command would remain in effect all the way to their arrival in Canaan.

But the most devastating part of God's message was His decision to rescind the promise of His divine presence. Back in chapter 25, Moses recorded God's plans for the Tabernacle.

"...let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." – Exodus 25:8 ESV

And when Moses had descended from Mount Sinai, he brought those plans to the people of Israel. But now, the construction of the Tabernacle was put on hold. The place of God's presence would not be built. Up until that moment, Moses had been accustomed to meeting with God at a place called the Tent of Meeting. This was another structure that was located on the outskirts of the camp where Moses would intervene on behalf of the people.

Whenever Moses went out to the Tent of Meeting, all the people would get up and stand in the entrances of their own tents. They would all watch Moses until he disappeared inside. As he went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and hover at its entrance while the Lord spoke with Moses. – Exodus 33:8-9 NLT

The Tabernacle had been designed to replace the Tent of Meeting. It would become the new dwelling place of God among His people. But their actions at Sinai had changed all that.

*"The significance of this turn of events cannot be stressed too highly. The whole purpose of the Exodus was for God and his people to be together. God's presence with them will be firmly established in the proposed tabernacle. By saying, 'go ahead, but you're going without me,' the events of the previous thirty-one chapters are being undone. This is not merely a setback; it means the end of the road." – Peter Enns, *Exodus**

This announcement left the people in a state of mourning. They were shocked and dismayed to find out that Yahweh would no longer dwell in their midst. They did as God had said and removed their fine clothes and expensive jewelry. They went into a state of mourning and tried to assuage the anger of their unhappy God with their outward display of contrition. But the damage had been done. Their rejection of God had been costly. They were now facing the prospect of traveling all the way to Canaan but without God in their midst. Their decision to replace Yahweh would haunt them for some time to come, and only time would reveal whether they learned the lesson God intended for them.

A Glimpse of God's Goodness

¹² 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.'¹³ 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."¹⁴ And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here."¹⁶ 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?"

¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ Moses said, "Please show me your glory."¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."²¹ And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock,²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by."²³ Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." – Exodus 33:12-23 ESV

Moses was perplexed and personally concerned about God's decision to remove His presence from the people of Israel. As the one commissioned to lead these "stiff-necked people" (Exodus 33:3) to the promised land, Moses knew that, without God's presence, his mission was doomed. God had declared His intention to vacate the premises because He knew the Israelites were going to continue their stiff-necked ways. Thousands of them had died as a result of their recent act of rebellion, so God told them, "You are a stubborn and rebellious people. If I were to travel with you for even a moment, I would destroy you" (Exodus 33:5 NLT).

Yet, He had ordered Moses to fulfill his original commission by leading the remaining Israelites to their final destination: "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 33:3 ESV). Moses was expected to take this ragtag remnant of fickle Yahweh followers the rest of the way to Canaan but without the benefit of God's presence. But the thought of trying to complete his task without God's presence proved to be too much for Moses. So, he took his concerns to the Lord.

This time, rather than ascending back to the top of Mount Sinai, Moses entered the Tent of Meeting, "which was outside the camp" (Exodus 33:5 ESV). The text introduces this special meeting place just before Moses begins his conversation with God.

Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When 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. – Exodus 33:8-9 ESV

This tent had served as a temporary “tabernacle” or sanctuary in which Moses would meet with God. It was located outside the camp and used as a kind of divine “phone booth” where Moses could communicate directly with God. Once the Tabernacle was constructed, this temporary tent of meeting would no longer be needed. But at this moment, with the Tabernacle yet to be built, Moses entered went outside the camp and entered the tent of meeting.

Moses had taken God’s announcement that He was removing His presence quite personally. From the moment God had commissioned him for this job, Moses had expressed his lack of qualifications.

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” – Exodus 3:11 ESV

Yet God had assured Moses, “I will be with you” (Exodus 33:12 ESV). And even when Moses had continued to express his strong doubts, God had told him, “Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak” (Exodus 4:12 ESV). But now, Moses was afraid that God was reneging on His promise. He had known all along that he was not up to the task, so the thought of leading the people of Israel on his own was more than he could stand. This led him to express his concern and consternation to Yahweh.

“See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.” – Exodus 33:12 ESV

Moses begins his debate with a less-than-accurate statement. He claims that God has failed to identify the one who will be accompanying him to Canaan. God had clearly stated, “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” (Exodus 33:2 ESV). But Moses wasn’t satisfied; he wanted more information. In a way, Moses was expressing his dissatisfaction with God’s alternative plan. He wasn’t content to have an angel serve as God’s proxy or stand-in. He wanted God Himself.

This led Moses to pull out his trump card. He appealed to the special relationship he enjoyed with Yahweh.

“...you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’” – Exodus 33:12 ESV

In a way, Moses was saying, “You say you love me, now prove it.” He was appealing to God’s lovingkindness and faithfulness. Moses had grown to appreciate the nature of God and was counting on Yahweh’s unwavering commitment to protecting His own reputation.

“...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.” – Exodus 33:13 ESV

Moses was pulling on God's heartstrings. In a rather transparent attempt to "guilt" God, Moses appealed to His sense of righteousness. Didn't God want to do the right thing? If Moses had found favor with God, wouldn't God want to be favorable to Moses? Moses was trying to capitalize on his unique relationship with Yahweh, in the hopes of getting Him to reconsider His earlier decision.

Having heard Moses' plea, God gave the answer Moses wanted to hear: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exodus 33:14 ESV). Yet even that positive affirmation was not quite enough for Moses. He wanted God to know just how important His presence was for this mission to be successful.

"If you don't personally go with us, don't make us leave this place. How will anyone know that you look favorably on me—on me and on your people—if you don't go with us? For your presence among us sets your people and me apart from all other people on the earth." – Exodus 33:15-16 NLT

Essentially, Moses was threatening to stay right where he was. If he had to stay the rest of his life in the wilderness of Sinai, where he was confident of God's presence, he was willing to do so. Moses was willing to give up the promised land for the promise of God's presence, power, and provision. Occupying the land of Canaan would be pointless because it was the presence of God that set the people of Israel apart from all the other nations on earth. Real estate or a relocation to a different spot on the map would not differentiate God's people. Moses understood that it was God alone who made the people of Israel a holy nation. And God provided Moses with the further assurance he needed.

"I will indeed do what you have asked, for I look favorably on you, and I know you by name." – Exodus 33:17 NLT

God would go with them. His presence would continue to dwell among them. But, almost pushing his luck, Moses made one more bold and daring request.

"Then show me your glorious presence." – Exodus 33:18 NLT

Moses was asking for more. We know that when Moses entered the tent of meeting, "the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent" (Exodus 33:9 ESV). This tangible and visible sign of God's presence hovered over the tent as Moses spoke with God, but Moses wanted a greater demonstration of God's presence. He wanted to see God Himself – in all His glory.

And as proof of Moses' favorable status, Yahweh agreed to give His servant a glimpse of His glory.

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will call out my name, Yahweh, before you. For I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to

anyone I choose. But you may not look directly at my face, for no one may see me and live.” – Exodus 33:19-20 NLT

What makes this concession so important is that God had already revealed Himself to Moses on more than one occasion. The first had taken place years earlier at the very same location in Sinai. Somewhere near Mount Sinai, Moses heard the voice of God speaking to him from the midst of a burning bush, which caused him to draw near. But “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6 ESV).

For more than a year, Moses had also witnessed the presence of God in the form of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Then there was the more recent occasion when he, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel shared a meal with God.

...they beheld God, and ate and drank. – Exodus 24:11 ESV

So, why was Moses requesting to see God’s glory? Notice that he did not ask for permission to see God’s face. He seems to have known better. The Hebrew word for “glory” is *כְּבוֹד* (*kāḇôḏ*), and it refers to God’s honor, splendor, or majesty. In a sense, Moses was asking to see *more* of God. Having feared the possible loss of God’s presence, Moses longed to see another manifestation of His glory and majesty. It is as if Moses was saying, “Show me more of Yourself!” And God’s response to Moses’ request was succinct.

“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’” – Exodus 33:19 ESV

It is unclear what Moses was hoping to see. But God is quite clear and highly specific when He describes what aspect of His glory that He will allow His servant to observe. It will be the fulness of His goodness.

“In this instance, at least, God’s glory is his goodness. It is not his power, his majesty, or his awesomeness that will pass by Moses, but his goodness. And Moses has already seen a lot of that. God has mercifully sustained his people in Egypt. That’s his goodness. God has dramatically delivered his people from their captors. That’s his goodness. God has graciously provided for his people in the wilderness and protected them. That’s his goodness. God has graciously entered into a covenant with his people at Sinai. That’s his goodness.” – Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus*

God agreed to let Moses get a glimpse of His goodness, and He summarizes exactly what His goodness entails.

“I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” – Exodus 33:19 ESV

To “see” God is to glimpse His goodness in the form of His grace and mercy. Moses, Aaron, and the rest of the people of Israel had seen God’s goodness repeatedly. Most recently, it had shown up in God mercifully sparing them from judgment. Despite what had happened at Sinai, they were alive and still able to worship and obey God. And God demonstrated His grace and mercy in how He revealed His goodness to Moses.

“...while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” – Exodus 33:22-23 ESV

God spared Moses’ life by answering his request in this way. Had Moses seen the face of God, his life would have ended in death. But that day, Moses got a glimpse of God’s goodness and lived to tell about it. As the glory of God “passed by,” Moses was covered by the protective power of God’s goodness. The all-powerful and holy God of the universe placed His hand over His servant to protect him from certain death. Moses got to see the “back” of God, but the good news was that God was not leaving. Not only would He not abandon them., but He would renew His covenant commitment to them.

A Plea for God's Mercy

¹ The Lord said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. ² Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. ³ No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain." ⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. ⁵ The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. ⁶ The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." ⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. ⁹ And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." – Exodus 34:1-9 ESV

As Moses stood in the tent of meeting at the outskirts of the camp, God agreed to give Moses a glimpse of His glory. But if Moses wanted to see his request fulfilled, he would first have to replace the tablets of stones he had shattered. The God-inscribed tablets lay in pieces on the valley floor where Moses had thrown them in anger when he discovered the sordid scene taking place among his people. Moses may have broken the tablets, but the law of God remained fully intact and in place. The holiness of God had not diminished and His holy expectations of His chosen people had not been altered by their actions. If anything, God's righteous laws were more important than ever.

The people of Israel had shown their true colors. Their allegiance to God had been exposed for what it was, weak and vacillating. It had taken no time at all for their faithfulness to Yahweh to wane and their commitment to keeping His laws to disappear like the manna did when the sun came up in the morning. So, God demanded that Moses carve out two more tablets of stone and return to the top of Mount Sinai.

"Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones. I will write on them the same words that were on the tablets you smashed. Be ready in the morning to climb up Mount Sinai and present yourself to me on the top of the mountain." – Exodus 34:1-2 NLT

And as before, God restricted access to the mountain, warning that no other Israelite was to come anywhere near Sinai. Not even the flocks and herds of Israel were allowed to graze near the base of the mountain. God was going to descend on Mount Sinai, transforming the entire mountain into a sacred place or sanctuary. This warning was intended as a not-so-subtle reminder to the people of Israel that they served a holy and transcendent God who deserved their reverence and whose power should elicit fear and awe. This was the very same God who

had promised to dwell among them in the Tabernacle that He had designed and commissioned them to build. At the moment, that sacred structure remained unbuilt but when completed, it too would become a holy place because it contained the glory of God's presence.

Moses obeyed God's command and chiseled out two new tablets to replace the ones he had broken. The original set had been hand-carved by God.

The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. – Exodus 32:16 ESV

This time, by having to do the difficult work of crafting the replacement stones, Moses would have skin in the game. Perhaps he would treat God's laws with greater respect if he had some sweat equity in their creation. But there is something else going on here. When Moses returned to the top of the mountain, he would be carrying stones that he had crafted with his own hands. They would be poor facsimiles of the ones he had broken. There is no way that Moses could craft stone tablets that were equal in quality to those made by the hand of God. Yet, God promised to write His law on the flawed stones made by human hands.

Centuries later, the prophet, Jeremiah would write the following words from God concerning the people of Israel.

"But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." – Jeremiah 31:33 NLT

God was speaking of a future day when He would restore His rebellious people to a right relationship with Himself. They had broken His commands time and time again and were subject to His judgment for their disobedience. He was going to punish them for their failure to obey, but He also promised to restore them. But notice what God said. He would write His laws on their **hearts**. And the author of Hebrews picks up on this idea when he writes:

But when God found fault with the people, he said:

*"The day is coming, says the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel and Judah.
This covenant will not be like the one
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
and led them out of the land of Egypt.
They did not remain faithful to my covenant,
so I turned my back on them, says the Lord.
But this is the new covenant I will make
with the people of Israel on that day, says the Lord:*

*I will put my laws in their minds,
and I will write them on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.” – Hebrews 8:8-10 NLT*

In a sense, those stone tablets carved by Moses’ hands were meant to symbolize the hardened hearts of the people of Israel. When Moses carved those stones out of the mountainside, they proved to be stubbornly resistant to the blows of his chisel and hammer. But when he carried them up the mountain, they would become the receptacles of God’s divine law. God’s intention all along was the change the hearts of His people. Laws without willing hearts to obey them become nothing more than regulations that condemn.

The apostle Paul spoke of this very issue from a personal perspective. As a former Pharisee, he had done his best to try and obey the law, only to discover that it was impossible. His heart wasn’t in it.

I discovered that the law’s commands, which were supposed to bring life, brought spiritual death instead. Sin took advantage of those commands and deceived me; it used the commands to kill me. But still, the law itself is holy, and its commands are holy and right and good. – Romans 7:10-12 NLT

He wrote the believers in Galatia: “If the law could give us new life, we could be made right with God by obeying it” (Galatians 3:21 NLT). But the problem was not with the law; it was with the hearts of those who refused to obey the law.

So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. – Romans 7:14 NLT

It’s interesting to note that, until God had given the Decalogue to Moses, there were no prohibitions against having any other gods than Yahweh. But once God had given the Ten Commandments to Moses and the people had agreed to obey them, the law became binding and irrefutable. They were non-optional. Not only that, they made sin indefensible. No Israelite could say he acted out of ignorance. All those who participated in the worship of the golden calf did so in spite of their understanding of God’s law and their verbal commitment to obey that law. They stood justly condemned.

And yet, God was graciously offering to provide them with another copy of His commands. This time, they would be written on hard, cold stones carved by the hands of Moses. But they would be just as binding and unbendable in their scope.

Before God inscribed His law on the new tablets, He kept His promise and revealed His glory to Moses. And His glorious presence was accompanied by the following speech.

*“Yahweh! The Lord!
 The God of compassion and mercy!
 I am slow to anger
 and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.
 I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations.
 I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin.
 But I do not excuse the guilty.
 I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren;
 the entire family is affected—
 even children in the third and fourth generations.”* – Exodus 34:6-7 NLT

If you recall, God had earlier told Moses, “I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose” (Exodus 33:19 NLT). Now, as He revealed His glory to Moses, God expanded on that statement. He describes His own commitment to show compassion and mercy to His people. He declares His unfailing capacity to show love and to forgive. And yet, He affirms His right to judge the wicked and unrepentant. He declares His intention to hold the guilty accountable for their actions. Not only that, He states that future generations will inherit the guilt of their forefathers. But what is going on here? How do we justify this statement with God’s earlier promise of forgiveness? The key lies in the Ten Commandments themselves. In giving the first two laws, God had added the following condition.

*“I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations **of those who reject me.**”* – Exodus 20:5 NLT

There was one sin that God would not forgive, and that was any rejection of Him as the one true God. He knew that this sin was particularly infectious. God knew that when the parents turned their backs on Him, the children would be prone to follow their example. And this hereditary sin would be passed down from generation to generation, with each subsequent generation bearing the guilt of their forefathers.

What had happened in the valley of Sinai was a serious breach of God’s law, but what made it even more dangerous was its potential for spreading a spirit of rebellion among the people of Israel. If it happened once, it could happen again and if it did, God would hold all those who rejected Him guilty and worthy of condemnation.

This foreboding word from God caused Moses to cry out, “Yes, this is a stubborn and rebellious people, but please forgive our iniquity and our sins. Claim us as your own special possession” (Exodus 34:9 NLT). He knew that without God’s presence, the people would be helpless, and without God’s forgiveness, they would be hopeless. So, he begged God to show mercy and extend forgiveness because he understood that the people of Israel were worthy of judgment. According to the law, they stood condemned. Which led Moses to appeal to the Law-giver to extend mercy and grace. It was their only hope.

The Key to God's Blessings

¹⁰ And he said, "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

¹¹ "Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ¹² Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. ¹³ You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim ¹⁴ (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), ¹⁵ lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, ¹⁶ and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.

¹⁷ "You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal. – Exodus 34:10-17 ESV

Moses had gotten what he asked for, and more. He requested to see God's glory and God had obliged. But God had also given Moses a verbal reminder of His identity.

The Lord passed by before him and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness, keeping loyal love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. But he by no means leaves the guilty unpunished, responding to the transgression of fathers by dealing with children and children's children, to the third and fourth generation." – Exodus 34:6-7 NLT

This divine declaration of God's nature led Moses to respond, "O Lord, let my Lord go among us, for we are a stiff-necked people; pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance" (Exodus 34:9 NLT). He was more convinced than ever that the Israelites were in desperate need of God's presence but would need an extra measure of His grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness. Their sin had separated them from a holy and just God, and only His compassion could restore the relationship they had broken. There was nothing they could do to redeem themselves or earn back God's favor.

And God responded to Moses' humble request by agreeing to remain among His people. But it would require a recommitment of the covenant agreement they had broken. In a sense, God was beginning again. He was giving them a second chance to prove their willingness to live according to His laws. And God was recommitting Himself to fulfill His part of the covenant.

"See, I am going to make a covenant before all your people. I will do wonders such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation. All the people among whom you live will see the work of the Lord, for it is a fearful thing that I am doing with you." – Exodus 34:10 NLT

The God whom they had greatly offended was declaring His intentions to act on their behalf. He would do great wonders and fearful works that proved their status as His chosen people. Just a short time earlier, God had revealed His frustration with His rebellious people by stating, “If I went up among you for a moment, I might destroy you.” (Exodus 33:5 NLT). Now, He was declaring His intentions to bless them by pouring out His power on their behalf. And one of the greatest manifestations of that power would come in the form of His defeat of all the nations that occupied the land of Canaan.

“I am going to drive out before you the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite.” – Exodus 34:11 NLT

Israel’s takeover of Canaan would not come without a fight, but they would be guaranteed victory because Yahweh was on their side. They had nothing to fear and everything to gain. But this promise of ultimate success came with conditions.

God warns the people of Israel two separate times about making covenants with the inhabitants of Canaan. Their only covenant was to be with Him and, for His part, He would remove their enemies from the land. For their part, they were to refrain from any kind of relationship with those nations.

“Be careful not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it become a snare among you.” – Exodus 34:12 NLT

God knew His people well. This warning was necessary because the Israelites had proven their propensity for unfaithfulness. God knew that, once the Israelites entered Canaan, they would be tempted to make treaties and alliances with their enemies. It would be easier to compromise than to conquer. But God prohibited His people from making any kind of concessions that might jeopardize their commitment to Him. The Israelites had already demonstrated their propensity for unfaithfulness. Long before they ever stepped foot into Canaan, they had chosen to replace Yahweh with a false god. What would happen when they crossed over the Jordan River and discovered that the land of Canaan was filled with altars and high places dedicated to all kinds of false gods?

God’s greatest concern was that His chosen people would choose to be tolerant and accepting of their Canaanite neighbors. They would be tempted to operate by the old adage, “Live and let live.” But God knew that any fraternizing with the enemy would prove to be disastrous, so He warned them:

“Rather you must destroy their altars, smash their images, and cut down their Asherah poles. For you must not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” – Exodus 34:13 NLT

Yahweh was not a tolerant and open-minded deity who was willing to share the affections of His covenant people. He would not abide by any sign of unfaithfulness or infidelity among His people. And He knew that the Israelites would find it difficult to refrain from unfaithfulness if they failed to clean house. God had guaranteed the removal of Canaan's inhabitants, but Israel was responsible for destroying all their idols and places of worship. Not a single shrine or altar was to be left standing because they would prove to be too great a temptation for the fickle people of Israel.

The Israelites should have learned a powerful and permanent lesson about God's jealous nature when 3,000 of their leaders had been destroyed for their role in the golden calf incident. These men had been put to death for instigating the rejection of Yahweh and His replacement with a false god. And they were not the only ones to suffer God's wrath. A plague put an end to an undisclosed number of Israelites who had joined in the insurrection.

So, God wanted to spare His people from any further judgment by reminding them of their need to remain faithful at all costs. God's plan for the removal of the Canaanites involved a slow and methodical process. It would not happen overnight. He had already told Moses, "I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land" (Exodus 23:29-30 ESV). But God knew that this plan for incremental expulsion would present a problem for the people of Israel. The ongoing presence of the Canaanites would tempt the Israelites to make alliances with them, which God completely prohibited, and for good reason.

"Be careful not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone invites you, you will eat from his sacrifice, and you then take his daughters for your sons, and when his daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will make your sons prostitute themselves to their gods as well." – Exodus 34:15-16 NLT

Close proximity would encourage moral laxity. The temptation to make alliances with their enemies would prove to be a problem for the Israelites. When they eventually entered the land of Canaan and saw the prosperity and power of their adversaries, the Israelites would find it tempting to take the path of least resistance and simply go along to get along. It would be easier to conform than to face the prospect of armed conflict. But conformity would result in compromise and compromise would lead to an abandonment of their convictions.

God reminds His people of the second of the Ten Commandments when He states, "You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal" (Exodus 34:17 ESV). The Israelites were not free to worship the existing gods of the Canaanites or a god they made with their own hands. This was a direct reference to the golden calf. The Israelites had already proven their ability to fabricate their own gods. So, it was going to get even harder when they entered the land of Canaan and discovered a virtual cafeteria of deities from which to choose. If remaining faithful

to Yahweh had proven to be difficult in the wilderness, how were the Israelites supposed to survive the idol-filled landscape of Canaan?

The key to their survival would lie in their willingness to keep God's commands and to maintain all the commitments that came with His covenant. Faithfulness would be the best defense against unfaithfulness. Living according to God's law would preserve the set-apart status of God's people. If the Israelites would only obey, they would experience the blessings of God and discover the joy of living in unbroken fellowship with Him.

The Source of All Sustenance

¹⁸ *“You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Abib, for in the month Abib you came out from Egypt. ¹⁹ All that open the womb are mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. ²⁰ The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty-handed.*

²¹ *“Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest. ²² You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end. ²³ Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel. ²⁴ For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times in the year.*

²⁵ *“You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the sacrifice of the Feast of the Passover remain until the morning. ²⁶ The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”*

²⁷ *And the Lord said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” ²⁸ So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. – Exodus 34:18-28 ESV*

This portion of Exodus 34 has left scholars scratching their heads in confusion and contradicting one another in their attempts to explain what is going on. In these verses, Moses records the words spoken to him by God when he returned to the top of Mount Sinai. It is clear that God’s emphasis was on the covenant and the law that accompanied it. But why does God seem to give such a strange and disjointed summary of the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant? He provides Moses with a random list of moral and ceremonial laws that appear to have no rhyme or reason behind them.

Yet, if one considers the context, it all begins to make sense. This entire exchange between God and Moses took place shortly after Israel had committed the sin of apostasy by worshiping the golden calf. In doing so, they had broken God’s laws and violated the covenant commitment they had agreed to keep. God had expressed His anger and judgment with their rejection of Him by having the leaders of the rebellion executed and by sending a plague to punish all those who had joined them in the worship of the false god they had made. But Moses had intervened on behalf of the people of Israel, begging God to extend grace, mercy, and forgiveness. He had also pleaded with Yahweh to remain with His chosen people, rather than abandon them as punishment for their sinfulness. And God had agreed to all of Moses’ requests.

But while God was willing to renew His relationship with His rebellious people, He was going to reiterate and renew His covenant requirements of them.

“Observe what I command you this day.” – Exodus 34:11 ESV

And what follows is a summary list of the laws He had previously given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses had already provided the people of Israel with the complete compilation of the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant.

Moses came and told the people all the Lord’s words and all the decisions. All the people answered together, “We are willing to do all the words that the Lord has said,” and Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. – Exodus 24:3-4 NLT

God had also given Moses the original set of stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments.

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandments that I have written, so that you may teach them.” – Exodus 24:12 NLT

These tablets had been shattered by Moses when he had come down from the mountaintop and discovered the people of Israel celebrating their new god. But the breaking of the tablets was not the problem; it was the Israelite’s breaking of the laws the tablets contained. They had not acted in ignorance. They had willingly disobeyed their covenant commitment by refusing to keep God’s commandments. So now, God was preparing to provide them with a second copy of the Ten Commandments and He accompanied it with a carefully chosen collection of laws that emphasized their covenant relationship with Him.

A close look at this seemingly random list of rules and regulations reveals that they have much in common. First of all, they were not to repeat the mistake they had just made.

“You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal.” – Exodus 34:17 ESV

No more golden calves. And no adoption and adaptation of the false gods of the inhabitants of Canaan. When they finally entered the land of promise, they were to purge it of all remnants of idolatry and pagan worship. No shrines were to be left standing. Not altars to false gods were to remain intact.

Not only that, they were to keep the feast days that God had established for them. There were to be no new feast days or special events associated with false gods or worthless idols. One of the things that infuriated Moses and caused him to destroy the original tablets of stone was to see his fellow Israelites dancing around the golden calf.

When he approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses became extremely angry. He threw the tablets from his hands and broke them to pieces at the bottom of the mountain. – Exodus 32:19 NLT

What Moses had witnessed that day was a man-made festival decreed by his very own brother. Aaron had not only given in to the people's demand for a new god, but he also set aside the following day as an official feast day.

"Tomorrow will be a feast to the Lord." So they got up early on the next day and offered up burnt offerings and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play. – Exodus 32:5-6 NLT

So, it makes sense that God would remind His people that they were limited to celebrating the feasts that He had established for them, including the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Once a year, they were to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt by holding three closely connected days of remembrance. The first was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. For seven days they were forbidden to eat anything containing yeast, a symbol of sin. Then, on the seventh day, they were to hold a feast, commemorating and celebrating their deliverance from their captivity in Egypt. Notice that the feast was to follow a period of abstinence from and purging of sin – the opposite of the celebration that took place after their sinful worship of the golden calf.

God also reminded them of the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Ingathering. These two feasts were to bookend the annual harvest.

"You must observe the Feast of Weeks—the firstfruits of the harvest of wheat—and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year." – Exodus 34:22 NLT

They were to recognize God as the faithful provider of all their needs by offering Him the first of all their harvests. There were to be no celebrations of false gods because they were incapable of providing any help or hope. Everything the Israelites had was a gift from God, including their food, shelter, flocks, herds, and children.

"Every firstborn of the womb belongs to me, even every firstborn of your cattle that is a male, whether ox or sheep." – Exodus 34:19 NLT

God was reemphasizing His providential care for His people. The very thought of aligning themselves with another god should have been abhorrent to them. No man-made god could match Yahweh's generosity and goodness. The Israelites owed all that they had to the gracious benevolence of their God, and they were to regularly celebrate His providential care by keeping His prescribed feasts. Even the weekly celebration of the Sabbath was intended to remind the Israelites that His provision was so generous that they could take the seventh day off. But this day was to be dedicated to Him.

Three times each year, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Ingathering, the men of Israel were required to appear before the Lord. These mandatory festivals were designed to be reminders of God's covenant faithfulness and to prompt the people of Israel to treat their gracious and generous God with the reverence and gratitude He deserved.

Every law and regulation God gave them was to be faithfully kept, including the rather obscure one that prohibited the boiling of a lamb in its mother's milk. God seems to reiterate this one for emphasis. There were to be no commandments that were overlooked or ignored. God's will was serious business and His call to obedience was not to be taken lightly.

For 40 days and nights, Moses communed with God, going without food or water. This reference to Moses' extended fast is just another reminder that Yahweh was to be the provider and sustainer of all their needs. Moses was energized and fueled by his access to God Almighty. He suffered no hunger, pain, or diminishment of his strength during that time. He feasted on the words of God and was nourished by His presence. And when Moses finished his time along with Yahweh, he descended the mountain one more time with a brand-new copy of the Decalogue in his hands.

A Faint Glow of God's Glory

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. ³² Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. ³³ And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. – Exodus 34:29-35 ESV

Moses had spent 40 days and nights on the mountaintop in his latest encounter with God. During that time, he had gone without food and water, yet somehow God had sustained him physically. His close proximity to God had supernaturally supplemented his body's need for physical food. Moses could have easily explained his divine enablement the same way Jesus did to His disciples.

*“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” – John 4:34
ESV*

But the time came for Moses to leave the mountaintop and return to the people. He carried in his hands the new tablets of stone containing the Decalogue, but he was unaware of a physical transformation that had taken place during his time with God.

...when he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to approach him. – Exodus 43:29-30 NLT



Moses glowed. His more than month-long encounter with God Almighty had left him physically altered. No explanation is given as to the exact cause of Moses' glowing countenance, but it came as a direct result of his interaction with God. Somehow, the glory of God "rubbed off" on Moses, causing his face to give off a luminous incandescence that was visible to all those around him. The Hebrew word translated as "shone" is קָרַן (*qāran*) and literally means "to send out rays" or "to grow horns." Evidently, his face emanated shafts

of light that were visible to Aaron and the rest of the Israelites, but Moses was completely oblivious to this dramatic alteration to his countenance.

In his gospel account, Matthew records a similar experience that Jesus had with His disciples.

*...after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. **And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.** And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. – Matthew 17:1-3 ESV*

During his time on the mountaintop, Jesus too glowed with the glory of God. And on that occasion, He was visited by Moses himself. These two servants of God had much in common, but while Moses served as the mediator of the old covenant, Jesus provided a new covenant that allowed both Jews and Gentiles to enjoy a restored relationship with God.

...dear brothers and sisters who belong to God and are partners with those called to heaven, think carefully about this Jesus whom we declare to be God's messenger and High Priest. For he was faithful to God, who appointed him, just as Moses served faithfully when he was entrusted with God's entire house.

But Jesus deserves far more glory than Moses, just as a person who builds a house deserves more praise than the house itself. For every house has a builder, but the one who built everything is God.

Moses was certainly faithful in God's house as a servant. His work was an illustration of the truths God would reveal later. But Christ, as the Son, is in charge of God's entire house. And we are God's house, if we keep our courage and remain confident in our hope in Christ. – Hebrews 3:1-6 NLT

But on that day when Moses descended the mountain, he held in his hands the law of God, and his face shone forth the glory of God. In a sense, the tablets reflected God's expectations of His people, but Moses' face reflected their need for God's power. Their capacity to obey God's laws would not be self-produced but God-endowed. Laws written on tablets of stone would prove to be ineffective if the hearts of the people remained hardened and their faces failed to reflect the glory of God.

Moses had spent 40 days and nights in God's presence, going without food and water, and yet he literally radiated an aura of spiritual and physical vitality. But at the sight of Moses' appearance, the Israelites cowered in fear. It was not what they had expected. Their fearless leader didn't look the same and his altered appearance left them confused and conflicted. The light that showed from Moses' face didn't attract them; it repelled them.

This scene foreshadows another time when the Son of God made His entrance into the world. The apostle John describes the coming of Jesus this way:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and **the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.** – John 1:1-5
ESV*

***The true light, which gives light to everyone,** was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. – John 1:9-11
ESV*

And Jesus would later expand on this theme of light in the darkness.

*“And this is the judgment: **the light has come into the world,** and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But **those who do what is right come to the light** so others can see that they are doing what God wants.” – John 3:19-21
ESV*

Moses was bringing the law of God and the light of God, but his own people rejected him. They turned their backs in fear and, in doing so, they demonstrated their love affair with darkness.

But Moses convinced them to return and “he commanded them all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai” (Exodus 34:32 ESV). His face aglow with the glory of God, Moses imparted to them the commands of God – again. This was not new information, but it was being communicated to them in a new and unforgettable way. Moses was radiating God’s presence, and this would have given his words far greater impact than ever before. This wasn’t simply a mortal man imparting legal requirements and moral mandates; it was a divinely ordained messenger from God communicating and reflecting the holiness of God. It was the apostle Paul who wrote “the law itself is holy, and its commands are holy and right and good” (Romans 7:12 NLT).

This time, God was communicating His holy laws through a holy vessel to an unholy people. The glory of God reflected in the face of Moses was meant to emphasize the gravity of the message and the authority of the messenger. Moses had given them the law once before and while they had vowed to obey all that God had said, they ended up violating His commands and replacing Him with a god of their own making.

The law had not changed. What Moses communicated to the people was the same as it had always been, but the deliverer was dramatically altered so that the recipients might take his words more seriously. And evidently, God continued to bestow His messenger with a supernatural outpouring of His glory for some time to come.

When Moses finished speaking with them, he would put a veil on his face. But when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil until he

came out. Then he would come out and tell the Israelites what he had been commanded.
– Exodus 34:33-34 NLT

This pattern would be repeated, all so that the people of Israel might take God’s messenger and message more seriously. But the apostle Paul reminds us that this divine strategy would run its course. The time would come when the glory on Moses’ face would fade, and the people’s reverence for the messenger and the message would dissipate. Sadly, Moses would continue to wear the veil long after God’s glory had faded from his face. And the people would eventually lose their fear of the light, reverting back to their love affair with sin and darkness. The apostle Paul provides commentary and much-needed insight into this fascinating passage,

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. Shouldn’t we expect far greater glory under the new way, now that the Holy Spirit is giving life? If the old way, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new way, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new way. So if the old way, which has been replaced, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new, which remains forever!
– 2 Corinthians 3:7-11 NLT

Moses wore the veil to conceal the glory of God. But Paul reveals that, eventually, that glory faded. He also states that the people’s minds were veiled by sin so they couldn’t comprehend the glory of God contained in His law.

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. 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. Yes, even today when they read Moses’ writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand. – 2 Corinthians 3:13-15 NLT

God had a better way in mind. But for the time being, the law was meant to serve as a foreshadowing of that better way. God revealed His glory through the giving of His perfect, just, and righteous commands. But the people would be required to obey them – completely and fully. And He had given His messenger an aura of His glory to validate the holiness of His message. But time would prove that the people of Israel “loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19 ESV).