

# The Journey: Fallen from Grace

## Exodus 32:1-6

4/21/24

Good morning, we are continuing our series on Israel's journey with God through the desert which is recorded in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

It's been a while so let's review what we've covered so far. In Exodus Ch. 1 – 15:20 God saves Israel. Israel is in bondage to Egypt who is an overwhelming power. Israel is powerless to free themselves, so God comes down to deliver them using the wooden staff of Moses. Everything that happens in the first 15 chapters of Exodus is all God's doing. All Israel has to do is accept the deliverance of God and they do. They walk right out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and into freedom.

God's saves Israel from Egypt in order to foreshadow how He would ultimately save the world from its bondage to sin. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We were powerless to save ourselves, so God came down and through the wooden cross of Jesus saves us. Salvation is a complete work of God. It is by grace alone. We can do nothing to earn it or add to it. To receive this salvation all you have to do is accept it and walk into God's freedom! Have you?

The rest of Exodus through Joshua 1 focuses on how to live as a saved people. Up until Exodus 15 Israel learned how to live a God-delivered life. Now they have to learn how to live a God-led life. And that began with God giving Israel the Ten Commandments, which is an outline for the life of a follower of God. All the teachings in chapters 19-24, Leviticus, and parts of Numbers and Deuteronomy are expositions on the Ten Commandments. They flesh out what a God-led life looks like in detail.

We pick up Israel's journey in Exodus 32. I do want to comment on the material describing the plans for and the building of the first Tabernacle, which latter becomes a permanent building in Jerusalem called the Temple. Why does God spend 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Exodus talking about the Tabernacle? It's hard to read and visualize what it looked like. I'm glad God gave us people gifted in the arts who drew pictures of what the Tabernacle looked like because I'd never have been able to figure it out. So, feel free to skip these chapters and look at the pictures. (Here's an example)

So why did God spend so much time on the construction of the Tabernacle? What is the Tabernacle? It's a place for God and his people to sit down at table and fellowship! The reason God is so specific in how he wants the Tabernacle built is because He's so excited about the opportunity to sit at table with us in fellowship! Later, Jesus refers to the Lord's Supper as the Table of the Lord. Heaven is described as a place where people from the North, South, East and West come together to sit at Table with the Lord.

Do you remember setting up your first home with your spouse and how perfect you wanted it to be? Or the first date or the day you proposed to your spouse? You wanted it to be perfect, right? Why? Because you loved him/her. You were passionate about spending the rest of your life with them. That's what God is doing in Exodus 25 -40. God is like a love-sick romantic who is setting up home for the first time for His spouse to be – Israel, and later, the Church. God longs to spend time with us! I wonder if have the same longing to spend time with Him? For many, it seems like it's the last thing we desire to do, which is a shame because we are missing out on some sweet fellowship with the Lord!

# The Journey: Fallen from Grace

## Exodus 32:1-6

4/21/24

In between the giving of the Ten Commandments and the building of the Tabernacle, is this tragic story. In Exodus 19 you read about one tragic event, the barbaric attack on Israel by the Amalekites. That's was an injustice done to them. In Exodus 32 we read about a tragic event that was self-inflicted.

In Exodus 19:8 Israel made a bold declaration: *"We will do everything the Lord says."* But by Exodus 32 that went out the window. It says... *"and {they} got up to indulge in revelry."* (vs. 6) That's the NIV translators being cautious with their language. *"revelry"* literally means *"sex play."* When they sinned, they sinned boldly!

What's interesting is, God never punishes Israel for their sexual sins. He punishes them for their idolatry. Why? Because "sins of the "flesh" are rooted in our emotions or biology which can overwhelm our rationality causing us to make some momentary bad decisions. However, *"sins of the heart or sins of the spirit"* are rooted in our character. They reflect who we are at our core.

These same two sins, sex and idolatry, were the same two sins Egypt was guilty of and the people of Canaan. What Israel was simply doing was living like the people of the world around them and that wasn't God's plan for their lives. They were called to be a holy people, a people who were different from the world because they had the Lord in their lives. And that's God's desire for us as well!

So, what do we do when we or others "fall from grace?" And is there such a thing as "falling from grace?" That's our focus today.

<sup>1</sup> *When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."*

<sup>2</sup> *Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."*

<sup>3</sup>*So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.* <sup>4</sup> *He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."*

<sup>5</sup> *When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."* <sup>6</sup> *So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.*

So how are we to respond to our sins and the sins of others?

### I. Be Gracious.

Be gracious. Be gracious to yourself and be gracious to others. If you've made a similar mistake, hurt for the person. Be empathetic. Don't do what the world does and pile on the person or hold it over their heads forever. Our world is becoming a very harsh and graceless place. One mistake and you can be alienated and isolated from others for the rest of your life! People will try and cancel you and de-

# The Journey: Fallen from Grace

## Exodus 32:1-6

4/21/24

friend you! That's not what God wants us to do. He wants us to focus on people's restoration, not destruction!

Most people, when reading this story in light of all the miraculous events Israel experienced over the past three months ask the question: *"What were they thinking! How could they go astray so quickly! And how could they discard Moses as their leader after all the things he did for them?"* He hasn't come down from the mountain yet, and they've already blown it! Before they claimed that they would do everything the Lord commanded and they ended up doing nothing the Lord commanded! How are we to understand this?

Well, for one, Moses hadn't come down the mountain yet. So, they didn't know about commandment #2: *"You shall not make any graven image..."* Exodus 20:4 They didn't know what they were doing was wrong! But had they thought through the events of the last three months they could have used their common sense and concluded some things. They could have concluded that God was real and not an inanimate object, that He speaks unlike the golden calf, that he's unseen but you can see the results of his actions unlike the calf. What did the calf ever do for them? That God is the Creator and not something created! At minimum they should have concluded, *"There is a God, and the calf is not it!"*

The answer to the question is: They weren't thinking! The Psalmists read the same story and came to the same conclusion: *"When our fathers were in Egypt they gave no thought to your miracles..."* Psalm 106:7 Had they, they would not have created a golden calf and worshipped it.

You could say, *"But Pastor, they weren't worshipping the calf. The calf was only a symbol, a representation of God! They didn't really believe the calf was God!"* And that is true! In those days people made symbolic representations of the gods. They didn't believe the physical objects were a god. They knew the gods were spiritual beings but represented them physically and symbolically as an aid for worship.

And Israel did a pretty good job at capturing in physical form what they knew about God. A god was represented by something in between the horns of a calf. The calf symbolized power, productivity – the god worked everything to your benefit. It was real – a real, physical object. And what did they put in between the horns of the calf? Nothing! Why? Because they knew their God was spiritual. He was like the wind. He's real but unseen. So, they captured God accurately in art form!

And, I think, that was Aaron's intent. I don't think Aaron thought he was giving Israel an idol. After he created it, he built an altar in front of the calf he said: *"Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord."* (vs.5) His focus was not on the calf or what the calf symbolized but on the Lord! I think, he thought it was helpful for Israel in their worship of God. That was how everyone worshipped their god(s) back then.

But what was intended by Aaron was misunderstood by the mob. They called the calf the *"gods that brought us out of Egypt."* (vs. 4) And that's the problem with symbols, especially symbolic representations of God. They can be easily misinterpreted. Plus, it is hard to capture the Infinite God using finite elements. Whatever you create always fails to accurately represent God in all His nuances.

# The Journey: Fallen from Grace

## Exodus 32:1-6

4/21/24

It's why God commands that we don't use the arts to create physical depictions of Him. Every time we do it gets us into trouble!

Let me illustrate this. During seminary I went to an American Indian college during the January term to pick up some extra credits. On the wall of their sanctuary was a huge portrait of Jesus but to my surprise he looked nothing like the Jesus in my church. Jesus was an American Indian in full Indian garb. It made me think: *"But isn't Jesus for all of us."* It's the same complaint people have of our white Jesus with pretty blue eyes. It causes you to wonder: *"Is Jesus for me and not just for white people."* It's the problem of any portrait of Jesus. We depict Jesus in our own image and that is not an accurate portrait of Him! Jesus isn't red, yellow, black, white, brown, blue, pink purple or any color! He is Savior and Lord of all!

Another problem with physical representations of God is, there is a fine line between image and idol, between symbol and meaning. All of us have symbols of success in our lives or symbols of God's blessings: A car, home, jewelry, income, the neighborhood we are in, a job, a title, cherished relationships frames and on our walls, health, our bodies, children, etc. All are symbols of God's blessings and there's nothing wrong with that. BUT...they can be easily turned into an idol.

When does that happen? When they become our focus. When they are seen, not just as symbols of God's blessings, but as the blessing itself. How you know something is an idol in your life is, you find it hard to give up! Symbols are easily relinquished because they only represent something you value! Idols are hard to relinquish because they are the things we value. They are the things we look to for security, to save us from this harsh world!

Our blessings were never meant to become our savior. They won't help you get through the desert. Only the Blessor can do that!

How do you know when a symbol is becoming an idol? When you seek the symbol rather than, or more than, the Savior. When you desire the blessing more than the Blessor. When the primary reason you obey God is not because you love him, but because you don't want to jeopardize losing the blessings he's given to you!

So what were they thinking? To understand why they did what they did, you have to get inside their shoes... or sandals in this case. They have been walking in the desert for three months. Ever walk on sand with sandals? I always walk on sand with bare feet because the sand gets in between your foot and the straps of the sandal and it rubs your skin raw!

It was hot. They were tired. They were hungry. They' were thirsty. And they were tired of manna every stinking day. How many different ways can you make it? Manna waffles, manna falafels, ba-manna bread!

We think, *"Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments! That had to be awesome."* They didn't know where Moses was taking them. They were told they were going to the Promised Land but that was north. They've been traveling South for three months! They are deep into the desert. It's barren! And to

# The Journey: Fallen from Grace

## Exodus 32:1-6

4/21/24

make matters worse, Moses has disappeared. Usually when he's been away it was for an hour or half a day at most. It's been 40 days, and they haven't heard a peep. Moses is old – 80! He's climbing a mountain alone. What if he's fallen and he can't get up? What if he fell ill? Maybe he had a heart attack! Who knows?

And with every passing day the people became increasingly anxious and fearful, which is a dangerous place to be. Most of the worst decisions we make are when we are stressed, fearful, anxious or worried. It causes you to do some stupid things and that's what happened! See what they did in that light, and it causes you to be way more sympathetic and gracious towards them. You can relate to them!

At least I do. I'll tell you a story that is now part of the Pfeil family folklore. My kids love to tell this story over and over again at family gatherings: Every house I have ever bought has had water problems, even though in every case the house did not have a track record of having water problems. I'm cursed in this way! I had just fought the battle of Waterloo in Pennsylvania. I sold that house and moved to Delaware vowing to never buy a house with water problems. I thought I did until one day it rained hard and guess what? The basement flooded!

This infuriated me greatly and I freaked out. When stressed I tend to go into General Pfeil mode and call out commands! As I yelled for the kids to grab all the towels they could to soak up the water before it damaged the walls, I tripped over arts supplies that were left on the basement stairs. That ticked me off as well! Why can't they put things away! So without thinking or looking I picked up a bottle of red glitter glue and threw it up the stairs. Unfortunately my youngest daughter was rushing down the stairs as I had commanded, carrying towels. The bottle nailed her on the head causing the bottle to ... you guessed it, explode. Red glitter paint splattering everywhere including on my nice beige carpet which I was trying to save.

So yes, the worst thing you can do is make decisions when stressed, anxious, fearful or panicked! It causes you to do stupid stuff that you later look back on and say: *"What was I thinking?"* Has anyone else panicked or had some emotional reaction to a situation that caused you to do stupid things? If so, then you can be merciful to Israel, to yourself, and to those around you who make the same mistakes.

Scripture says: *Be merciful just as your heavenly Father is merciful.* Luke 6:36 *"Mercy triumphs over judgement."* James 2:13 Or at least it should. We should choose mercy over punishment.

How else should we respond when we fail or others fail?

### II. Keep Walking.

Never give up on yourself, God or others! So often when we blow it we think God couldn't possibly love us anymore. We are sure he is about to give up on us. We think that especially when it comes to sins we commit repeatedly! And don't pile on a person or be punitive towards a person who sins to

# The Journey: Fallen from Grace

## Exodus 32:1-6

4/21/24

the degree it discourages them in their walk with God! Don't demonize them or treat them harsher than God would!

How did God treat Israel after this colossal failure? Here's what God said to Israel the day after the golden calf fiasco: *"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.'<sup>2</sup> I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites'."* Exodus 33:1-2

What? I don't get it? He's not pounding on them? They blow it big time and one day later everything is back to normal? That's not how we treat ourselves or others when they blow it big time! They hadn't lost their salvation! They were still sons and daughters of God! He hadn't given up on them. He says, *"Okay, let's go!"* There's no more guilt. No cold shoulder. No alienation or hard feelings. No self-condemnation. It's as if nothing ever happened and that's what forgiveness is- God restoring us to himself and treating us as if nothing had ever happened! All the promises of God were still there's.

That's not how people treat the fallen today! It becomes part of your permanent record. People don't forget. Some sins are seen to be so bad that you can't shake the Scarlet Letter for the rest of your life! People don't remember all the good you did or all the right choices you made. You are defined by that one bad decision!

That's not how God dealt with Israel when they failed and that is not how God treats us. He forgives. He restores. And he loves us despite what we did! Our status as his sons and daughters never changes no matter what we do! He might not like what we did but his love for us never changes!

Oh, they took their lumps. And to their credit they didn't blame Aaron and Aaron didn't blame them for what happened! They owned up to what they did, took the consequences, and returned to the Lord – which is what repentance is.

And when you sin, there will be consequences and it's important to "man up" and accept them without trying to shift the blame onto someone or something. At the same time, it's important to not allow the bad decision to ruin your life or the life of others. And don't let others ruin your life. Forgive yourself. Forgive others and then forget about it! Move on! Don't look back. And if others were involved, make it right with them. If they won't forgive you, that's on them. Depending on how hurtful the sin, it may take them time to forgive you so give them time and space to process things. But keep seeking their forgiveness until you have it. And if someone sins against you, forgive and forget. The focus should always be, restoration and not destruction.

The only way Israel could have missed out on the Promised Land is if they had stopped walking. Some did and they died in the desert but most, most got up and kept walking with God. We need to do the same! The only way you can miss out on heaven or your salvation is if you stop walking with the Lord.

Listen to these verses. They are so important.

# The Journey: Fallen from Grace

## Exodus 32:1-6

4/21/24

Here's what Paul said to his congregation about how to handle failure: *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* Philippians 3:12-14

Don't get stuck in a guilt pit. Get up and keep walking with God no matter what others think or say about you. No matter how you feel, get back up and press on!

Proverbs are timely observations about life. Here's time test wisdom on how to walk with God, despite what happens in your life: *"The godly may trip seven times, but they will get up again. But one disaster is enough to overthrow the wicked."* Proverbs 24:16 (NLT) Don't let one disaster overthrow your faith! The Christian walk is not a walk of perfection but of perseverance. In the book of Revelation God calls out each church for its sins and then ends each letter with: *"Whoever is perfect will be saved."* No! Every letter ends with *"Whoever perseveres to the end, will be saved."* Just keep walking and you'll end up in the Kingdom of God!

As horrible as I felt after discovering my wife's infidelity and plan to run off with her boss, who was fat and 10 years older than I was, which really hurt (BUT he had money!) I knew I had to forgive her. I knew I had to stay measured and not lash out. I wanted to! I was struggling to forgive but then a word came to me and it was almost audible: *"Do not allow this one mistake (And it was a doozy) negate all the good decisions and all the good things your wife did as your wife and the mother of your kids."* To be honest, up until then, she was a good wife and a good mother. Today we are on good terms! She'll never be my wife again but at family gatherings during the holidays or at weddings we talk and are cordial to each other. No ranker or bringing up the past. Only God could do that in a person's life!

One more passage: *"For he (God) knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him."* Psalm 103:14, 17 God knows how weak we are. God knows we are going to make mistakes but *"from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him."* So when you fail tell yourself: *"The Lord loves me! He still loves me!"*

I didn't believe this early in my life but I do now, now that I know the Bible better. There is no such thing as "falling from grace." Sin cannot knock you out of the clutches of grace. God has got you. You may miss out on some of his blessings, and life may become harder for yourself, but you will not lose your salvation. Your status as son and daughter of God was established on the cross and that status will not change! You did nothing to earn your salvation! So why would you think you can do something that will cause you to lose it? You may not make it to the Promised Land, but you will make it to Paradise!