

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Exodus 32 (read vv.1-10) “The Causes & Cure of Spiritual Failures”

Intro. Have you ever experienced failure? Have you ever messed up big time? Of course you have. Perhaps you failed a class in school, or at least failed a test. Perhaps you messed up and lost a friend, or even a spouse. Perhaps you have been fired from a job. Perhaps you made a New Year’s resolution, and you have already broken it. Spiritual failure can be even more serious. As you look back on your life, you can probably remember a time when you messed up spiritually. You yielded to temptation and committed a pretty serious sin. Or perhaps you went a long time being unfaithful to church, to prayer, and to Bible reading.

Well here in Exodus 32 the Israelites were put to the test. According to Exodus 24:18, Moses had left them for 40 days & nights to commune with God in the Mountain, and to receive more instructions. God revealed to him the details about the tabernacle, and how they were to worship Him, and make atonement for sin. Forty is a number of testing. Recall that Jesus was tested in the wilderness for 40 days.

Well how well did Israel do on their first test after receiving the covenant? Keep in mind that they had sworn 3 times, “All that the Lord has spoken will we do, and be obedient” (19:8; 24:3, 7; and see 20:19). Things were finally going along pretty well for the Israelites. But here in chapter 32, they mess up big time. In fact, three times in this chapter Moses said they committed a “great sin” (vv.21, 30, 31). You see, while Moses tarried up in the mountain, they pressured Aaron to make an image of the god or gods who had led them out of Egypt. It is amazing how quickly they broke the 2nd commandment not to make graven images. In fact, God said in v.8, “They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them.” Aaron failed the test of spiritual leadership by going along with them, instead of standing firm & rebuking the people. Essentially, they broke the 1st commandment, for even though Aaron called the golden calf by God’s name (YHWH, v.5), they were now worshipping a different god. And once they followed the pagan way of worshipping a graven image, they quickly yielded to the temptation of following the pagan style of worship, which included sexual immorality. No doubt some in the camp quickly broke the 7th Commandment not to commit adultery.

What makes their quick failure even more amazing is the fact of what they had only recently experienced. They saw the mighty judgment against Egypt and their gods. They experienced the great deliverance of God through the Red Sea, and the victory over the mighty Egyptian army. They saw & experienced God leading them through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. Every morning God provided manna to satisfy their hunger, and many times He miraculously gave them fresh water to drink in an arid land. They saw from a distance the glory of God on top of the Mountain. They saw the fire and smoke of His holiness & righteous anger. Yet in spite of the goodness of God, they quickly turned aside from following the Lord with a loyal heart. As you read this story, you just shake your head wondering how Israel could mess up so quickly, and so badly.

But lest we point fingers and cast stones at the Israelites, let us recall the fact that we have failed also. We have sinned. We have departed from the Lord at times in our lives. Perhaps right now you are not loyal to the Lord.

What I want to do today is examine the causes of spiritual failure. Once we understand the causes, we can be better equipped to avoid spiritual failure. Then I will briefly point out the condemnation of spiritual failure. Then I hope that will motivate us to seek the cure of spiritual failure. So first of all:

I. CONSIDER THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL FAILURE

This is the first step in finding a cure. I believe there were several causes or factors that led to spiritual failure then and now.

A. Our Sin Nature Causes Us to Fail – Here in Exodus 32 we see the true nature of man. Ever since Adam & Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, the human race has been plagued with a sin nature. We have a clear bent toward sin and wrong. In fact, Aaron rightly said in the last of v.22, “You know the people, that they are set on evil.” Paul wrote in Romans & Galatians that the law was given to show us that we are sinners. Even so, shortly after Israel first received the law, they began to break God’s law.

One aspect of our sin nature that is identified here in our text is the stubbornness of our hearts. God said in v.9, “I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!” God repeated the same charge twice in the next chapter (33:3, 5). That is a literally translation. Instead of turning their necks from the wrong way to the right way, they were stiff-necked, and pursued the same wrong course. There were obstinate and unyielding to the Lord. By nature we want to live life our own way, and we don’t like anyone trying to tell us how to live our lives. In fact, some minds are like concrete, thoroughly mixed up and permanently set.

Do you acknowledge that you have a sin nature? Are you sometimes stubborn when it come to yielding to correction? If so, you are heading to spiritual failure, just like the Israelites.

B. A Lack of Restraint Cause Us to Fail – Notice what v.25 says, “Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies).” Literally it is “let loose.” Have you ever heard the expression, “She’s a loose woman”? That refers to a woman who has cast off moral restraint. It seems that no one was standing up and speaking out to restrain the evil of what was happening. Where were the elders at such a crisis? Where was Hur, who was put in charge with Aaron (24:14). We are not told what they were doing, or why they were so passive. Where was Miriam? They either were silent, or they even participated in this pagan worship. Aaron certainly failed to restrain the people. He was the top spiritual leader in the absence of Moses. He even facilitated the fulfillment of their sinful desires.

Notice what happened when they cast off godly, moral restraint. Eating a covenant meal was a common feature of worship (vv.5-6; 10:9; 12:14; 13:6; 24:11). But they probably did not restrain their appetites very well. As they feasted on the sacrifices they probably ate too much. Many probably drank too much wine. As part of the festive ritual, we read in v.6 that they “rose up to play.” They probably told jokes & teased one another to produce laughter & merriment. Some started flirting and playing with the opposite sex.¹ Some of the young people started playing “spin the wineskin bottle.” We know they started singing & dancing. We read about this in v.18b, where Moses said it is “the sound of singing I hear.” I’m quite sure they were not

¹ See use of the word translated “play” in Gen. 26:8; 39:14, 17, where it probably refers to flirting & sexual foreplay.

singing songs of praise to the Lord, but songs of merriment,² perhaps Egyptian songs of praise & celebration to whatever gods they were worshipping. Then it says in v.19, “So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing....” They were dancing to the songs they were singing. They had cast off all restraint, including modesty and sexual restraint. Based on Moses instruction in v.27 to “go in and out from entrance to entrance³ throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor,” it is likely that many had retired to their tents to commit immorality & adultery (cf. Num. 25:7-8). Many had completely cast off moral restraint.

At one time in our country there was widespread acceptance of Judeo/Christian morality. Any behavior that conflicted with that morality was restrained at home, at church, at school, and out in society. There used to be restraint of immodest dress. Boy, have things changed, and not for the better. Most restraints of evil have been removed. We even have gay pride marches in the streets of some of our major cities.

I feel sorry for children & young people who live without much restraint of the corruption of evil. Their parents have abandoned their responsibility. The school cannot seem to define right from wrong. Society & the media won't restrain evil for the most part. Many children & youth live without boundaries, and many are falling off the precipice into destruction.

What has been the result of casting aside moral restraint today? Compared to the 1960's when things really began to change, alcohol abuse is up. Drug abuse is up. Immorality and out of wedlock births are way up. Divorce is more common. Crime rates are up. Suicide is up. We will never win the drug war until we get back to the basic principles of moral restraint in this country.

We need to acknowledge the human nature is sinful, and it needs restraint. We need to reject the kinds of unrestrained sinful activities that we read about here. The sinners of this world feast, get drunk, and engage in dirty, seductive dancing. They tell dirty jokes and laugh. They flirt & sport about with other men's wives, or other women's husbands. They commit immorality and adultery. But the people of God ought to stay clear of such unholy activity. Ephesians 5:4 says that we are not to engage in “filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting.” I'm not saying that God wants us to sit around and have no fun. The Christians I associate with have a ball when we get together in good, clean Christian fellowship. But if you and other fail to restrain evil, we will succumb to spiritual disaster.

C. Worldly Influences Cause Us to Fail – The Israelites wanted to be like the Egyptians and other nations. All other nations worshipped idols, and they wanted to as well. Notice in v.4 that Aaron “received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf....” Why did Aaron make the idol in the form of a calf? It was probably because the Egyptians worshipped a god named Apis, which was represented by a calf.⁴ That was familiar to the people. That was a common idol form in the Middle East. Israel had served

² I base this on the context rather than the meaning of the word itself, which normally refers to humble or afflict oneself. It is almost identical to the word translated “shout” in the same verse.

³ This Hebrew word (*sha`ar*) is usually translated “gate,” but by far it's most common use in Exodus is to refer to the *entrance* of the tabernacle, which was a large tent (Exodus 27:16; 35:17; 38:15, 18, 31; 39:40; 40:8, 33). On the other hand, each tribe may have set up camps, and this refers to the entrances to each camp. There is a different Hebrew word (*pethach*) that was used for the *door* to an individual home (12:22-23), but it was also used for the door of the tabernacle (26:36; 33:9-10).

⁴ Enns says that the calf was really “some sort of earthly representation of that god. Specifically, it was thought that calves or bulls functioned as pedestals for the gods seated or standing over them.”

false gods in Egypt (Joshua 24:14; Ezek. 20:4-9; 23:3, 8) and they wanted to be like other nations.

Worldly influence also causes the problem of peer pressure. Notice in v.1 that “the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for 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.’” Then in v.2 Aaron seemed to offer no resistance whatsoever, but even made a suggestion to facilitate their request. He said, “Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” Then, as we read in v.4, he “made a molded calf.” You would think that since Aaron was the High Priest of the LORD, and the brother of Moses, that he would stop the people. But he did not.

Why did Aaron so easily yield? Well we read in v.1 that “the people gathered together to Aaron.” I believe a large crowd faced him. He was just one man against hundreds, so he yielded to the pressure of the crowd. Down through the years all too many priests and ministers of religion have pleased the crowd rather than the God they are supposed to serve.

We must learn the lesson that those who love God sometimes have to set themselves dead against the rush of popular feeling. If you are going to please God, we have to be ready and willing to resist the pressure to please our peers. We must be willing to stand against the flow of popular opinion. But remember this: One man, with God at his back, is always in the true majority.

Because of the power of peer pressure, we need to separate ourselves from worldly influences. Be careful about the TV programs or movies that you watch. Be careful about the music you listen to. Don’t have close friendships with those who live ungodly lives. Furthermore, we had better not get our religion from the world. The world’s religions are false, though they typically have some truth sprinkled in them. Satan is in the religion business. He is a deceiver. He substitutes a counterfeit religion for the true.

Now that I have warned you of some of the causes of spiritual failure, I want to ask you to:

II. CONTEMPLATE THE CONSEQUENCES OF SPIRITUAL FAILURE

Failing in school can have serious, long-term consequences. Failing in your marriage can have even more consequences, especially when children are involved. But spiritual failure can have the most significant consequences, for everything else flows from that. Notice with me 3 of the consequences of spiritual failure:

A. Sin Corrupts – God told Moses in v.7, “Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.” That word “corrupted” means “too spoil, ruin, corrupt.” Picture in your mind that piece of fruit that has gone bad. Think of that piece of meat that has spoiled. It sinks. You can’t eat it.

Even so, sin corrupts. It brings corruption to your own life. Galatians 6:8 says, “For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption...” And just as corruption and spoilage tends to spread, even so the corruption of sin tends to spread so that a whole society becomes corrupt. 1 Cor. 15:33 says, “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’” 2 Peter 1:4 mentions “the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

B. Sin Brings Condemnation & Judgment – As a result of the moral failures of Israel, God said in v.10, “Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.” That is what they deserved! The holy, righteous wrath of God is clearly on display in this chapter, though overall, the mercy of God prevailed. In the end, those who were unrepentant and the most guilty were executed for the wrong they had done. According to v.28 about 3,000 fell that day.

You say, “How terrible!” Well keep in mind that a spiritual rebellion was taking place, which would have led to the ruin of the nation had not the most guilty been rooted out.

When you have cancer, you want to try to get rid of it. If it means cutting away half of your body, you want to get rid of it. Sin is an awful cancer, and God uses extreme surgery in this case by slaying those who were guilty. The dreadful retribution must be regarded, not as massacre, but as legal execution. That removed many of the one who spread such evil among the people in the future. Was it better to cut out the cancer now and save the nations or let the cancer grow and destroy the nation?

One truth of the Bible that is found from Genesis to Revelation is the fact that God judges sin. Righteousness, and the judgment that flows from His righteousness, is fundamental to His nature. You need to make sure you either avoid sin, or receive forgiveness. Furthermore, Exodus 32 teaches that:

C. Sin Brings Chastening – Those in authority should chasten those who do wrong. Moses certainly did. When he arrived, it was worse than when parents come home unexpectedly to find that their teenagers have thrown a drunken party. When that happens, the party is over! Even so, when Moses saw what was happening, he became angry & cast the two stone tablets of the law and broke them. That shocked them into a clear understanding of what they have done. They have just broken God’s law. Then to vividly demonstrate the impotence of idol god they worshipped, he destroyed it by burning and melting it down,⁵ ground it up, scattered the bits of gold & ashes in their drinking water, and made them drink it! (Cf. Num. 5:12-31). It reminds me of an old fashioned mom who chastened a foul-mouthed child by washing their mouth out with soap and water.

Even so, when you do wrong, you will probably be chastened at home, at school, at work, or in the courts. Many have reaped the consequences of their sin.

Even if sin does not bring the chastening of men, even if you think you have gotten by with it, sin brings the chastening of God. He said in the last of v.34, “Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin.” Then v.35 says, “So the LORD plagued the people because of what they did with the calf which Aaron made.” God in His grace forgives our sins, but God in His government allows sin to work out its terrible consequences in human life. We reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7-8).

For example, God put away David’s sin, but warned him that the sword wouldn’t depart from his own household, and it didn’t (2 Sam. 12:1-14). David’s life was spared, but he still suffered the consequences of his sin.

We need to avoid spiritual failure so we can avoid the chastisement that comes with it.

These effects of sin are real, but the good news is we do not have to suffer the consequences of spiritual failure. So last of all, I ask you to:

⁵ We need not find difficulty in “burning” a golden idol. Just as most of the furnishings of the tabernacle were to be made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, it is likely that the golden calf was made of wood overlaid with gold. Or, it was burned to melt it down to a shapeless lump.

III. CLAIM THE CURE OF SPIRITUAL FAILURE

Exodus 32 shows us what we need to do to be cured of the spiritual failures in our lives:

A. Don't Make Excuses but Confess Your Sins – Again, 3 times Moses rebuked what they had done by saying they had committed a “great sin.” They needed to agree with Moses, and confess that they had indeed committed a great sin. If you don't agree that what you have done is a sin, you are much more likely to do the same thing again. In v.30 Moses made confession on behalf of the people. Other than that, there was very little confession of sin by the people. They only implied confession of wrong by offering little resistance to the chastening Moses inflicted. They knew they were guilty.

Aaron did not do too well here. When confronted by Moses, he did not confess the wrong he had done but offered excuses. He said to Moses in v.22, “Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil.” That was certainly true, but that did not excuse Aaron from even cooperating with them in their evil. Instead of accepting responsibility, he blamed the people for what he had done. Ever since the Garden of Eden we have been trying to blame others for the wrong we have done. And after the people pressured him to make gods for them, he directed the people to contribute gold earrings. Now notice what he said in the last of v.24, “So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out.” Evangelist Billy Sunday said that an excuse was the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie. Well, Aaron's excuse was a bold-faced lie here. He claimed that he put the gold in, and it was as if the golden calf miraculously was formed! He would plead the miracle as a vindication of what he had just done. Even if a miracle had taken place, it still is no proof that God did it. Satan uses miracles & tricks to deceive.

If you want to get along with God, you will have to agree with Him about sin. Sin is sin and it must be confessed in detail. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

B. Put Your Faith in the Saving Work of Christ – We see this pictured in Moses. As soon as He learned of God's intent to judge His people, Moses stood in the gap to save them. Even so Jesus Christ knew that sin had condemned us, but He came to save us. He did it by dying in our place. In vv.31-32 we see that Moses said to God, “Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.” The allusion is to the citizens' roll (Ps. 87:6). It is the “book of life” (or “of the living”; cf. Isa. 4:3; Jer. 22:30; Ezek. 13:9; cf. Ps. 69:28). Based on the Lord's response in v.33, I believe Moses was offering his death as an atonement and substitute for the people. Of course God did not accept that a means of forgiveness, for Moses did not qualify as a spotless sacrificial lamb. He deserved to die for his own sin. But Jesus did qualify, and He offered Himself as a sacrificial lamb. The Bible says He died for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2). So the means of atonement Moses offered, substituting himself for his people, which God did not accept, is what Christ was able to do!

Even so, the completion of our salvation is also based upon the intercessory ministry of Christ, as we learned in a recent message. Though we sin, Christ pleads our forgiveness based upon His finished work on the cross.

Next, to overcome spiritual failure, let us:

C. Accept the God-given Restraints of Sin – Notice in v.25 that “Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies).” Clearly a spiritual leader like Aaron had a responsibility to restrain evil and false worship. Spiritual leaders today need to rebuke sin, and help hold people accountable when they go astray. Even civil leaders have an obligation to restrain evil. According to Romans 13:4, one of the primary functions of government is to serve as “an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.” That police car on the side of the road may even help restrain God’s people from violating traffic laws!

We believers have other God-given restraints of sin. When you are saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit you have inner self-restraint. When you even think about doing wrong the Holy Spirit convicts you. Right? One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control (Gal. 5:23). Next to the Holy Spirit is my wife. She keeps me in line. She may be 5’ 2” but she has spunk! Even I as a pastor need accountability & restraint. 1 Timothy 5:20 says that church elders “who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.” I know if I do wrong I could be publicly rebuked, or at least the rumor mill will see to it that everyone knows what I have done!

So I call upon you to overcome spiritual failure by accepting the God-given restraints of evil. Receive the Holy Spirit. Join a church, and be accountability to the leaders of the church. Have accountability partners. Stay active in church.

Conclusion: In v.26 Moses said to the people, “Whoever is on the LORD’S side—come to me.” They have come to a fork in the road. They must be either for the Lord or against Him. Well according to our story today, only the sons of Levi stood with the Lord and Moses. Most Israelites failed to publicly acknowledge their wrong and take a stand for the Lord.

Even so, there comes a time in our lives when we need to make a firm resolve to stand for the Lord and what is right. We have to choose between right and wrong, between the Lord’s people and the ungodly. In just a moment I am going to invite those of you who have never made a profession of faith in Christ to come forward, and declare publicly that you are on the Lord’s side, that you accept Christ as your Savior & Lord. It’s time to get off the fence, and declare your allegiance.

Sources: Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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