

Walking by Faith: Learning to Walk Slowly

[Exodus 32:1-6](#)

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

There are times when God is so obviously present in your life and in our world. And there are times when it is hard to find any evidence of him at all. It is in the times when God seems absent that you make the most important choice of life -- will you live by faith or turn to idolatry?

It has been three long, hard months since the Exodus. God has continued to lead the people south into the Sinai desert, where food and water are scarce and where reasons to be afraid are plentiful. To make matters worse, Moses has been away from the people up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days. Moses' absence was the source of the people's greatest fear, because he was the mediator who stood between God and the people. Whenever the people heard the Word of the Lord, it was always through Moses. So it wasn't just that the people missed their leader. In his absence they also experienced the absence of God.

Put yourself in their sandals. Feeling abandoned out in the hot, barren desert for so long, without any word from God, or any certainty that he remembers you're even out there. It's enough to make you do something desperate. Like the Hebrews, you may have been chasing a dream for long time, longer than few months. Maybe it has to do with a relationship, or a child, or your health. It's such a good dream. You're sure it came from God, but it has yet to be a dream come true.

Maybe you came to Washington to work for something important like justice, defense, good government, or civil rights. You got involved because you felt called to it by God and because you had a dream about making a difference. But the journey to the Promised Land has been harder than you counted on. The building you work in now feels like a target for terrorists. About the time you got used to that, you found yourself standing in line to get tested for Anthrax. But that's nothing compared to the poisoned spirit of politics some days. So you and the high ideals that brought you here could use a little help from God. Where is he?

When you start wondering if God has forgotten about you, it will soon be tempting to look for something a little more tangible in a deity. "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us who shall go before us; as for this Moses . . . we do not know what has become of him' (Exodus 32:1). What the people were saying was, 'Aaron do something to take away the fear. Make another god for us that is more manageable, a god we can get our hands on when we really need him.'"

Notice that when the people become anxious they also become religious. Always. No one stands up and says, "Okay, there is no god. We're on our own out here. Who has a plan?" No, when they are discouraged with the true God, people always search for other gods. G.K. Chesterton claimed that when people stop worshipping the God of heaven and earth, they don't worship nothing. Rather they worship everything. "Maybe what I need is a new job, or a new house, or a new move, or a new relationship." Whatever it is you are counting on to get you out of the desert and into your dreams quickly is an idol.

The Hebrews choice of a golden calf seems strange to us, but that is only because we are not ancient Semitic people. For them it was a common idol of strength. Lots of people in their day worshiped the young bull. It was familiar and predictable. It was a god they could shape with their own hands, just like our idols of success, wealth, and power. And, best of all, a golden calf doesn't make any demands on you. It doesn't have ten commandments you're expected to obey. It doesn't expect you to believe in it even when it fails to do what you want. It doesn't even demand exclusive loyalty. If the gold calf doesn't work for you, try the gold watch. Maybe retirement will make you happy. It's okay with the calf. The calf doesn't care how many other gods you try. The calf is so agreeable.

By contrast, Yahweh, the Lord Jehovah, is completely unmanageable and very demanding. He will not be shaped by human hands, and he will not come every time you beckon. But that is only because he is making room for you to have faith. If God was on a leash, you would not need faith. Faith is what binds you to the God you cannot control. And faith is exactly what God demands of you. That is why he brought you out in the desert in the first place. The point of the journey isn't to arrive. The point is to learn how to walk with God by faith. Because it is your faith that changes your life from being a slave to fear, to becoming a free human being.

A real leader is not someone who distracts people from their fears by giving them idols. A real leader is someone who knows how to help people overcome their fears by helping them find faith and courage. This is especially what is needed when times are hard and when God isn't in a hurry.

At this, poor Aaron failed miserably. Trying to calm the people down, he reduced his leadership to merely servicing complaint, giving them what they wanted. He told them to give him the gold earrings of their wives, daughters, and sons. (See, even then. . .) He melted down the gold and shaped it into a calf. When the people saw the idol, they danced around it and proclaimed, "This is the god that will deliver us." But not Aaron.

Aaron built an altar before the calf and said, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord." The word for Lord in the Hebrew is Yahweh, which is the exclusive Hebrew name for God. So Aaron doesn't think he has given the people an idol. He thinks he has given them a symbol that will help them worship the true God. But there is a fine line between symbols and idols.

You may have lots of symbols of God's blessings in your life, such as your home, cherished relationships, job, or income. Those symbols will become idols on the day it is impossible for you to give them up. Symbols are easily relinquished, because they only symbolize that which is valued, whereas idols are the things to which we cling. They are symbols that we have turned into gods. The blessings from God were never meant to be your saviors. They won't get you through the desert. Only the Blessor can do that.

Up on Mt. Sinai, the Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely. . . they have cast for themselves an image of a calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it. . . Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them." Moses responds to God's anger with what may be his finest hour. "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" (32:7-11). Isn't this wonderful? Down in the valley the people are dancing in front of a gold calf. Up on the mountain Moses and God are arguing over to whom these people belong.

Notice that as Moses pleads the people's case before God, he doesn't say, "Sure they're idolaters but remember all the good things about them." There aren't that many good things. So instead, Moses reminds God of his own nature to be faithful. Moses says, "God you are the one who started this dream by taking the people out of Egypt. Now it's the credibility of your own promises and faithfulness that's on the line." This is a great, gutsy prayer that can only be spoken by a leader who has faith, not in the people and not in himself, but faith in the faithfulness of God.

This is the leader's awesome responsibility -- to stand in between the people and their God and to call both to faithfulness. That means that leaders take responsibility. They take responsibility for the faithlessness of humanity that makes the world terrorized and unjust, and they take responsibility for the promised Kingdom of God where peace and justice reign. Thus, it is in the leader's soul that heaven and earth are held together.

This is exactly where Aaron failed. He failed to take responsibility. After Moses gets down the mountain and says to his brother, "What have you done?" Aaron whines about how demanding the people were. Then he says, "So I said to them whoever has gold, take it off, so they gave it to me, and I threw it in the fire and out came this calf" (32:24). With this adolescent excuse, he is doing all he can to avoid responsibility for either the people or God. Aaron just wants out of the whole business.

God was willing to let Moses out. When he was so angry on Mt. Sinai, God said to Moses, "Let me burn up

these people and you and I will go to the Promised Land by ourselves." But Moses embraced his responsibility to the people and dared to keep God accountable to his own sacred nature to be merciful to them.

When the going gets hard, when the planes are being hijacked, and the towers are crumbling, and our Pentagon stands with a gapping wound in its side, we gather into houses of worship to call for God's mercy. Not because we deserve it, but because it is the nature of God to be faithful with mercy.

The text tells us that God was so moved by Moses' prayer on Mt. Sinai, that he "changed his mind" about the disaster he planned to bring upon the people. God changed his mind? What is that about? Can God change his mind? This has frightening implications if we take it out of context. My suggestion is -- don't take it out of context. In this text it means that God can be moved by your prayers. Particularly when you are reminding him of his tendency to be faithful even when you are not. That's the only hope a bunch of idolaters like you and I have for getting through the desert.

Lord God, we do believe but need so much help with our unbelief. Do not grow weary of our faithlessness but out of the bounty of your mercy be faithful still in guiding us all the way home. Amen.