

EXODUS 32: THE GOD WHO STAYS

SERMON-ALIGNMENT CURRICULUM

by Kevin McGill

When you're separated, broken up, or divorced, we have many responses. But one response is: "What happened? How did it go wrong?" There's the distance, the emptiness, the disorientation. This is even more true when it comes to our relationship with God. Just last week, you thought everything was going well. You didn't notice the drift, the division. And then one day, it becomes clear that God and you are separated. Now, theologically, nothing can divide us from the love of God. But there can be a kind of spiritual legal separation. You and God no longer live in the same house. There is one reason that God removes His presence from you, me, and the people of Israel in the Bible: **infidelity**. We gave our hearts to another. In the book of Exodus, we've called these infidelities idols. **Tim Keller gives a great definition: "Idolatry is taking good things and making them ultimate things."**

Group Question:

Did you experience a bad breakup or someone you were crushing on who turned you down? What went wrong?

The Idol Is What We Control (Exodus 32:1)

"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down... they said, 'Up, make us gods.'" When the people saw that Moses delayed, they acted. The first thing we notice is that word, delayed. Delay is a biblical theme. When Samuel delayed to arrive for a sacrifice, King Saul took matters into his own hands and sinned. When Jesus delayed visiting Lazarus, Martha chided Him. When God delays, it's because He wants to expose our hearts. The people's response to Moses's delay was impatience—and then control. Impatience and control are the twin children of fear. The Israelites took control by recruiting Aaron and telling him to "make us gods." Do you want to know what your god is? In a moment of fear, what do you try to control? What do you reshape to comfort you? That's your god. Sometimes it's your time. Sometimes it's a project that got taken away. Sometimes it's a relationship you should have ended long ago. We take control and shape whatever it is into a god to serve and comfort us. The Fam with Kids group is reading Grace-Based Parenting. One thing became clear: your child can become your idol. The book lists several faulty parenting styles: The Get-It-Right Blueprint. The Stay-Safe Blueprint. The Win-at-All-Cost Blueprint. All are motivated by control. The parent shapes the child to serve the parent's needs—ego, validation, reputation. The minute the child moves outside that control, fear rises. Delay reveals the heart. Impatience and control are the twin children of fear. When afraid, we reshape something to comfort us—that's our god.

Group Question:

- 1. When God seems to delay, what do you instinctively try to control instead of waiting on Him?**
(Read: Psalm 27:14; Isaiah 40:31)
- 2. What area of your life might God be asking you to release control and trust Him with?**
(Philippians 4:6–7)

The Idol Is an Old Comfort (Exodus 32:2–3)

"As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said, "Take off the rings of gold in the ears of your wives, sons, and daughters, and bring them to me." This idol was made from the gold the Israelites plundered from Egypt. God, in His grace, let them take the Egyptians' gold to use for His tabernacle. But they took that same gold and made it into an idol. They used old cultural artifacts to make a god that brought them comfort. Our idols are born out of old comforts. They come from old stories. When you're afraid, you turn to old instincts. There's even a neurological reason. When you're under stress, the prefrontal cortex—the part of your brain responsible for self-control and planning—slows down. The basal ganglia, the region responsible for habits and routines, takes over. Distress shifts your brain from thinking mode to autopilot mode, so you fall back on old habits, even unhealthy ones. Some of us just "bed rot." Others return to old and toxic patterns. But neurologists say the way out is building new habits. If you've developed the habit of depending on God in the good times, then in stress, that's who you'll turn to. Fear drives us back to familiar stories and habits.

Group Question:

- 1. What part of your old life still feels comforting even though you know it's not life-giving?**
(Romans 6:6–7)
- 3. How can you replace an old comfort with a new spiritual habit that leads you closer to Christ?**
(Colossians 3:9–10)

The Idol Is a Visible Power (Exodus 32:4)

And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. The golden calf was a clear signal to any religious person—strength. In Egypt, the calf symbolized virility and power. In the face of fear, we often rush back to anything that appears powerful. One of the hardest things about following God is that He's invisible. When you feel insecure, you need a visible savior—your stock portfolio, your clothes, your family, your reflection in the mirror. But God's power is love, grace, and healing—things you can't touch. So we turn to visible powers because they are tangible and promise help. But it's an illusion. Those powers aren't too great; they're too small. What's a stock portfolio in the face of grief? What's a dress style in the face of cancer? You need God's unseen power—love, grace, healing. When God feels invisible, we run to something we can see—status, image, wealth, family. But those powers are not too great; they're too small.

Group Question:

- 1. What visible “powers” or symbols of security compete with your trust in God’s invisible strength? (Read: 2 Corinthians 4:18; Hebrews 11:1)**
- 2. How have you experienced the unseen power of God sustaining you in weakness? (2 Corinthians 12:9–10)**

The Idol Requires Amnesia (Exodus 32:4–6)

And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” These clearly weren’t the gods who brought them out of Egypt. Every person in that camp had witnessed the ten plagues, the manna, the quail, the Red Sea. Yet idols have a way of rewriting history. An idol makes you forget God. It erases His fingerprints from your story. You start to say things like, “Thank goodness for my degree from Chapman,” or, “Thank goodness for my connections in the industry.” And then verse 5 says Aaron built an altar and proclaimed, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” The next day they offered sacrifices, ate, drank, and “rose up to play.” That’s exactly what we do in the face of our unfaithfulness. The next morning, we try to airbrush it over with a worship set or a podcast. But their “play” wasn’t innocent—it meant revelry. We mask rebellion with religious busyness—worship, service, study—but forget the One who saved us. Reflection: Am I thanking my idols for what only God has done?

The God Who Stays — Ḥesed (Exodus 34:6–7)

There’s an important Hebrew word in Exodus—perhaps the most important in the whole book: ḥesed. Moses, like a child who doesn’t want to see his parents divorce, steps in. The same Moses who’s been rash and insecure rises above it all to fulfill his calling—not delivering Israel from Pharaoh, but from the wrath of their own God. Exodus 32:11–14: Moses pleads: “O LORD, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did He bring them out?’ Turn from Your anger. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom You swore...” Moses makes two arguments: 1. What will the Egyptians think? 2. You made a promise. Moses isn’t acting as God’s brand manager—he’s concerned about God’s glory. Glory is who you are in the room—your influence. If God destroys Israel, the nations will think He deceives His people. Then Moses reminds God of His covenant promise. In short, “God, Your glory is that You keep Your promises to Your people.” And God relents. Later, in Exodus 34:6, God reveals His name: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” That steadfast love—ḥesed—is love with commitment. Mercy married to loyalty. Israel deserved divorce papers, but God rewrote the covenant and renewed His vows. When Moses stood between a holy God and a faithless people, there was one reason God didn’t walk away: ḥesed. When Israel broke the covenant, they traded a living God for a golden statue. If this were any other relationship, it would end in divorce. But ḥesed means God keeps loving even when His people stop being lovable. He keeps showing up when we’ve walked away. Idolatry says, “I can’t wait for You.” Ḥesed says, “I’ll wait for you anyway.” When God reveals His name to Moses, He says: “I am the God who does not give up on covenant-breakers. My love outlasts your sin.” That’s why the story doesn’t end with the golden calf. God doesn’t file for divorce—He renews His vows. And centuries later, that same ḥesed took on flesh in Jesus. He is the embodiment of ḥesed

—the faithful love that stays when everyone else leaves. When you drift from God, remember: He doesn't move out. He moves closer. You can't out-sin *hesed*. You can't outrun *hesed*. You can't outwait *hesed*. Because *hesed* isn't just God's feeling toward you—it's His promise, His name, His heart. The God who stays.

Group Question:

1. Where in your story do you see God's loyal love refusing to give up on you? (Psalm 136:1–3)
2. How does understanding God's *hesed*—His loyal love—reshape the way you view your failures? (Read: Lamentations 3:22–23; Romans 8:38–39)