

**The people, at the foot of Mount Sinai, are falling into four sins**

*(i) Impatience*

Now the story switches to what is happening at the bottom of Mount Sinai. Moses has been up on Mount Sinai for a few weeks. Because of the delay the people camping at the foot of the mountain fall into serious unbelief. Again, as has happened several times before, they criticise Moses, and they want to make an idol which they will use as a 'god'. They think they will march into Canaan, the promised land, with this 'god'.

They are falling into four sins. (i) **Impatience**. Because God is delaying, they abandon their loyalty to God. Only a few weeks before they had been saying 'All that Yahweh has spoken we shall do'<sup>□1</sup>, but after only a few weeks' delay they are ready to abandon all their claims to be God's obedient people. They are ready to totally give up any faith in Moses who had performed such miraculous signs and who had held them in loyalty to Yahweh during these previous months. A little delay and they are ready to throw up all claims to godliness.

*(ii) Scepticism concerning Moses*

(ii) **Scepticism concerning Moses**. 'As for this Moses ... we do not know what has become of him'<sup>□1</sup>. People are quick to turn from God, and they are quick to turn from the leaders that God has given them. People tend to be loyal to their leaders – as long as everything is successful. But now there is a small delay. They cannot imagine that Moses will take as long as six weeks to be with God. Now they are ready to abandon the one who has done so much for them. They have forgotten the wonderful things that happened through Moses. They have forgotten the dividing of the Sea of Reeds, and the wonderful provision that came down for them while they were travelling.

*(iii) They are ready to turn to idolatry*

(iii) **They are ready to turn to idolatry**. These people were models of faith not long ago. 'By faith they passed through the Red Sea ...'<sup>□1</sup>. Now they ask for an idol to be made<sup>□2</sup> and Aaron is ready to follow their lead<sup>□3</sup>. They do not think they are turning to **other** gods. They think that an idol can be made to **represent** God in the form of some kind of statue. So, at Aaron's instruction, they use their golden jewellery and bring the gold to Aaron<sup>□4</sup> and he makes a model of a calf, which is meant to represent the god which delivered them from Egypt<sup>□5</sup>.

This is the very thing that God spoke to them about in the Ten Commandments, It is only a few weeks since they heard God saying, '*You shall not make for yourself an image ...*'<sup>□1</sup>. Now they are making an image of an animal and calling it a god! The Israelites thought they could liken God to an animal! But an idol always misrepresents God. It is Jesus who is the image of the **invisible** God. 'He who has seen me has seen the Father', said Jesus.

*(iv) They were turning to licentiousness*

(iv) **They were turning to licentiousness**. Aaron built an altar<sup>□1</sup> and said 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh.' Aaron was deluding himself that he and the people were worshipping 'Yahweh', the God who delivered them by the blood of a lamb. They next day they offered whole burnt offerings, symbolising dedication to this new idol of theirs. Then there was a 'peace offering', the kind of offering which was the most joyous and gave the most scope for making merry. They turned the 'worship' into an occasion of gluttony and immorality. 'They rose up to play' refers to the immorality that accompanied that kind of idol-worship.

• They turned the 'worship' into an occasion of gluttony and immorality.

• Inconsistent!

How inconsistent can the true people of God be? The answer is 'Very inconsistent!' These Israelites had truly expressed their faith in God's promise not very long before. What is happening now does not mean that their previous faith was not genuine. There is not the slightest reason to think that there was anything faulty about their sheltering under the blood of the lamb. Their faith in passing through the Sea of Reeds was wobbly<sup>□1</sup>, but there is no reason to think that it was not true faith. Hebrews 11:19 singles them out

□1 19:8

□1 32:1

□1 Hebrews 11:29  
□2 32:1  
□3 32:2  
□4 32:3  
□5 32:4

□1 20:4

□1 32:5

□1 see 14:10-12

as (at that point) great believers like the many other heroes of faith in that chapter. 'By faith they passed through the Red Sea . . .', he says very firmly and dogmatically. There is no hint that their faith was not real. And yet within no time at all, the people are falling into the most fearsome sins of unbelief and idolatry. But this may well happen! God's people are frail and weak, prone to wander. Let none of us think we are any different!

**Israel was not chosen by God because they were specially holy**

• Great inconsistency and weakness

This incident should also make us realise that God chose Israel because of His own purpose and grace. Israel was not chosen by God because they were specially holy. Their entire history shows that they were rebellious people, like any other nation. 'You always resist the Holy Spirit', Stephen said to the leaders of Israel centuries later. It was true right from the beginning. God did not choose Israel because of how godly they were. Not at all! God chose Israel, for His own purposes, out of sheer amazing grace. And yet God takes a 'risk' when He lays hold of people in this way. They may well show great inconsistency and weakness.

Another reason for being sure that these people were inconsistent believers is 1 Corinthians 10. Paul takes the story as one which relates to Christians. He warns Christians against making the same mistake that Israel made. Even a Christian may fall, says Paul<sup>1</sup>, and he points to Israel as an illustration of the fact.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:13

• Saving faith has to become applied faith

Saving faith has to become **applied** faith. Those who are saved by faith in the blood of the lamb next have to work out their faith in everyday situations.

• Aaron comes under pressure. He is a bad leader because he is following the people he is meant to be leading.

Exodus 32:1–6 lets us know that large numbers of God's people may fall badly. This was Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 10:1–5. Even Aaron fell. The whole people drifted from the **LORD** very rapidly, despite wonderful things that had happened only a short time before. They all had passed through the sea in the miraculous way we have read about in Exodus. They **all** were 'baptized into Moses'. Yet the vast majority of them fell into sin, and God was not pleased with them at all! Aaron would soon be the great high-priest. What made him fall so badly? It was easy to sin because everyone was supporting the idolatry and unbelief. There was no one withstanding the trend. Aaron comes under pressure. He is a bad leader because he is following the people he is meant to be leading.

• Yet God does not give up on his people

Yet God does not give up on His people. God tells Moses what is happening<sup>1</sup> and Moses intercedes for them<sup>2</sup>. Moses had not sinned. The one who had not sinned in this way prays for those who had sinned.

<sup>1</sup> 32:7-10  
<sup>2</sup> 32:11-14

• We survive despite terrible backsliding ways, because Jesus is our intercessor

This is why God does not give up on us – because we have an Intercessor. Our intercessor is Jesus. If any person sins we have an advocate with the Father. Israel survived because Moses interceded. We survive despite terrible backsliding ways, because Jesus is our intercessor.



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