



CHAPTER 5

Wilderness Substitutes

Exodus 30-32

After delivering more than a million Israelites from ten generations of slavery, God invited an elite group of elders for a visit. Flawed as they were, 74 emancipated slaves experienced an extremely rare event. Divine reality stood on the substance of heaven, and they dined in His presence. Unlike the rest of humanity, they saw God with their eyes. Before revealing Himself, God anticipated their response and instructed to Moses saying,

*“Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and **you shall worship at a distance**. Moses alone, however, shall come near to the Lord, but they shall not come near, nor shall the people come up with him.”* (Exodus 24:1-2 NAS)

*Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and **they saw the God of Israel**. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So **they saw God, and they ate and drank**. (Exodus 24:9-11 NAS)*

The Sin of the Calf

At God’s invitation, Moses and Joshua ascended further up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the law, and instructional commands.¹ During that time, the returning elders became complicit in casting a golden calf fashioned by Aaron with an engraving tool. Less than 50 days after their unprecedented encounter, they resorted to worshipping a man-made model of a baby ox. With the glory of the Lord radiating from the mountaintop, they *“exchanged the truth about God for a lie”,* and *“worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”*²

¹ Exodus 24:12-18

² Romans 1:25 ESV

At the people's request, privileged leaders molded a plastic savior—a human invention concocted from Egyptian earrings to masquerade as their God.³ God told Moses:

“They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it [translated “bowed down” from Hebrew shachah in NIV]” (Exodus 32:8 NAS)

Having witnessed the truth about God with their own eyes, these leaders forged an idol and proclaimed, *“This is your god, O Israel that brought you out of the land of Egypt!”*⁴ The Hebrew people concurred by approving of this golden substitute designed by ordained priests. A nation brainwashed by fear and deception bowed to worship an inferior deity. They also offered animal sacrifices while praising the impotent fraud.

A nation privileged with supernatural sights and sounds celebrated as if God Himself were visibly present. Yet, God was not to be found. This artificial connecting point was a bona fide delusion. Desperate sojourners linked up with a dubious impostor. The Lord was so angry with Israel's idolatry that He stated His intention to destroy them all. The chosen nation, which had experienced miraculous manifestations in God's presence, was condemned to death.

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. (Exodus 13:21 NIV)

Human eyes observed His glory. Human ears heard God speak in an audible voice; and they lived to talk about it. Men and women, boys and girls

heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, all the leading men of your tribes and your elders came to me. And you said, “The Lord our God has shown us his glory and his majesty, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a man can live even if God speaks with him. (Deut 5:22-24 NIV)

God revealed His divine nature and eternal power to Israel through supernatural signs and wonders. Nonetheless, they selected a fabricated model to serve as their connecting point. They indulged themselves in the synthetic presence of an

³ Exodus 32:1

⁴ Exodus 32:8 NAS

artificial deity. They worshiped a plastic model, manipulated to serve as a substitute for God's awesome majesty.

Unlike followers of Christ, 74 elite elders experienced an audiovisual connection with the Almighty. They beheld His glorious majesty and worshiped in an exclusive venue—not from a cosmic distance or during a dream, but close up and personal. As weeks passed however, separation from God's presence became the norm. Perhaps they could not tolerate fading memories or bear withdrawal symptoms associated with His absence. They craved repeat encounters to revive their perception and alleviate their fear.

Desperate to fulfill their longing for a glimpse of His stunning beauty, leaders and followers alike compromise the truth in an attempt to bring Him closer. Whether it's anxiety over leading or insecurity over following, both tempt us to reach out and take what God is not offering. Fear of perishing in an unpredictable wilderness can drive us to fake it—or to give others permission to control us with empty religion and artificial surrogates.

Pretending to connect with God through religious models, we con ourselves in an unnecessary charade. God's presence always resides everywhere—He is omnipresent. The Holy Spirit rests upon us, dwells within, and surrounds us. Though God appears invisible and silent in an audiovisual sense, He avails Himself with ready access. Despite everything we see and hear, Jesus holds the distinction of being more permanent than all the atomic substance in the universe. He is the standard for existent reality.

When Jesus said, *"It is to **your advantage** that I go away"*, He announced a new season optimized for divine connections.⁵ Apparently, for the time being God prefers interactions that transcend our natural senses. While Jesus rarely materializes, the Holy Spirit fills us with divine substance. Synthetic substitutes are unnecessary when God's presence dwells within. Investing time and energy in a figurative relationship distracts us from the authentic connection that God offers.

Counterfeit deities are like chewing gum. After hiking through the wilderness without drinking, a piece of gum will not quench our thirst. As dehydration sets in, chewing and swallowing our own saliva fails to deliver what we need. No matter how well flavored gum may taste, it will never replenish body fluids, which are essential for life. The Holy Spirit offers springs of living water to satisfy and hydrate our thirsty soul.

⁵ John 16:7 NKJ

Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive... (John 7:37-39 NAS)

Moses Refused to Connect with a Supernatural Substitute

God issued a nation-wide death sentence for everyone that worshiped His replacement. This response reveals God's heart when obstinate people concoct a plastic substitute for divine reality. Moses petitioned God for mercy and mediated a stay of execution. In response, God proposed an alternative sentence—as a test. He commanded Moses and the Hebrew people to separate themselves from His presence, and He offered another substitute, superior to the golden calf. God challenged Moses to accept an angelic escort to accomplish their mission in the Promised Land. He offered supernatural strength from a holy angel to drive out their enemies.

Our Heavenly Father made the following proposition: face annihilation or replace God's manifest presence with an angel. The Lord told Moses,

***"Depart, go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way."** (Exodus 33:1-3 NAS)*

Moses was not a conventional yes-man concerning this separation option. He did not reply to God's multiple-choice test with resigned compliance. In a strong-willed plea, Moses opted for a fill in the blank answer. At all costs, he was committed to an inseparable connection with God's presence.

Moses cried out in prayer from the core of his ruling passion! He said, *"that I may know you"*.⁶ With a daring appeal linked with his greatest need Moses said, *"If Your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here."*⁷ Moses would not disconnect from God's presence. His decision was resolute; separation was not an option. Moses preferred to die in the wilderness under God's wrath

⁶ Exodus 33:13 NAS

⁷ Exodus 33:15 NAS

than sever his connection. Their interpersonal bond was more important than life itself. Moses was more concerned with retaining the Lord's presence than:

- Survival (personally or corporately for his nation)
- Success (accomplishing his divine assignment)
- Attaining material blessings in the promised land
- Preserving his position of authority
- Maintaining a sense of significance through human approval

Moses' connection with God took precedence over:

- An angelic escort to reach his destination
- Supernatural assets to accomplish his goals
- Angelic power to drive out the enemy

Moses refused to be a functionary. He would not compromise his relational priorities simply to get the job done. Nor would he abandon principled values to accomplish his dream. Moses treasured his connection with the presence of the Lord above all else. He would not tolerate a golden impostor or an angelic substitute. Regardless of the cost, Moses would not distance himself from God.

Sometimes we find ourselves wedged in the wilderness, desperate for a divine encounter. We want to succeed in our mission, but we need to refocus our priorities. Moses' response targets the bull's-eye of our greatest need. Our greatest need is not survival; it's not getting the job done. Above all else, we need to know the truth about God, and we need to connect with Him directly and consistently.

Our relationship with God excludes competing idols. That means we cannot connect with God while latched onto an artificial proxy. Our Heavenly Father does not permit counterfeit saviors; they neither restore nor sustain our vital connection with Him.

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