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### **Here's What Hit Me 3 – Rebellion – doing what comes naturally – 1.24.10 – Exodus 32**

Some things that come naturally, meaning that you don't have to work at them...indeed, they happen when you don't work at them.

- You gain weight.
- Your hair gets messy.
- Your extension cords and headphone cords get tangled up.
- You spend too much money.
- You stay up too late.
- You get spaghetti stains on your new shirt.
- Your yard turns into a jungle.

These are things you don't have to plan for or discipline yourself to do. You have to plan and discipline yourself to go the other way. And we can add one more:

Rebellion against God. It's what comes naturally. This is what hit me this week as I listened through Exodus and especially chapter 32. Rebellion is easy to do. Just go with the flow, take the easy course, let yourself drift through life, fail to read the Bible, ignore prayer – and you'll find yourself in rebellion against God. You don't have to make New Year's resolutions to do these things. They just happen if you ignore what matters most. And they lead to rebellion.

Rebellion doesn't mean you become a Satanist, or that you get a tattoo on your face. It can mean that you simply and quietly live for yourself in a socially acceptable way. It's not God's money that he has entrusted to me, it's MY money. It isn't that I have a certain amount of time in this life to do my Father's business, it's my time to be good to me and do what I want.

Rebellion. All it takes is doing what comes naturally.

**Exodus 32** is a sad chapter in the early history of Israel. Last week we saw how God brought the extended family of Israel, of Jacob, down into Egypt. It was through Joseph, and it was during a time of famine when God miraculously put Joseph, son of Jacob, in charge of Egypt to save them from starvation. The family of Israel numbered 70 at that time. Decades passed, centuries passed, and Israel grew into a nation, and a Pharaoh arose who didn't know about Joseph and the Egyptians forced the Israelites into slavery. This was the condition for years, until finally God produced a deliverer, Moses, to lead them out of Egypt. The miracles flowed. Ten plagues. The parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army. Through these events, God led Israel, now numbering over two million people, out of Egypt and into the desert.

Then God called Moses to come up on Mt. Sinai and receive his Law. It was a scary time. The mountain was covered with smoke. There was strange thunder. Moses, their leader, went up on the mountain and disappeared from their sight. They were told to stay back from the mountain or they would die instantly. It was frightening. I understand that.

What is strange is how quickly they rebelled. After all those miracles? After such a mighty and impossible deliverance? Or maybe it isn't so strange, since we know in our hearts that rebellion happens when we do what comes naturally.

In **Exodus 32**, they rebelled: <sup>1</sup> **When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."** "This fellow Moses" seems so dismissive. God's choice, God's appointed leader. Now he's just "this guy", and he's gone. We can't see him, so we can't count on him. Aaron isn't just some guy either. He is Moses' brother and the man God has chosen to be the high priest. You'd expect him to talk the people down from their fears. Here's what he says:

<sup>2</sup> **Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."** <sup>3</sup> **So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.** <sup>4</sup> **He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."** It's hard to put ourselves in their place, because when we are afraid and we're not sure we can count on God (a very common and natural temptation), the last thing we would do is to make a statue of a farm animal and pray to it. But understand that this was how people worshipped all around the Israelites. It was the way of life in Egypt, and the Israelites were constantly being pulled in this direction throughout the Old Testament. They were always different than other people. Other nations had gods that you could carry around and see. These idols represented spirits to them. The god of the Nile river. The god of the crops. The gods of fertility. The ten plagues were each an attack on one of these supposed gods, and each of the plagues was sent to show Israel and Egypt both that there was One True God who made the Nile and who sent crops and children through his created order.

The Israelites were different. Their God was invisible and that made them look crazy. It isn't easy being different and when you're under a lot of stress, you tend to reach out for the answers you know. When you are under a lot of stress and God seems far away, what draws you? An addiction? The comfort of buying some new gadget or trinket? Alcohol or entertainment? When the Israelites formed this golden calf and worshipped it, they were doing something similar. When we read through the chapters in Exodus, it doesn't make sense to us that they would turn to an idol so quickly, but they have been through a lot and their fear is real here, and when they gave into it and did what came naturally, this is the result.

<sup>5</sup> **When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."** <sup>6</sup> **So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.**

<sup>7</sup> **Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt."** <sup>8</sup> **They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and**

**have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'**

Now when we talked about Sodom and Gomorrah a few weeks ago, and how Abraham bargained with the Lord to save the cities if only a few righteous people could be found there, we talked about how important negotiation was in that day and how it still is in many parts of the world today. In some places, it is rude and offensive if you just name a price for something and stick to it. That isn't how it's done. I don't understand that. It isn't how I was raised. But it is a fact and it appears again and again in the Bible and I think that it's the key to understanding some puzzling passages of Scripture, like these next two verses:

**<sup>9</sup> "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."**

You can go back and look at the promises God has already made and the prophecies that he has already sent about the tribes of Israel and it's obvious that his plan has never been to destroy the people and start over with Moses as the highest patriarch of a new nation. But there is a lesson that comes to us in the process of the negotiation, the back and forth, where we find out something about God and about his plans and even about prayer.

**<sup>11</sup> But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.' " <sup>14</sup> Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.**

And yet, there would be consequences.

**<sup>15</sup> Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.**

**<sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp."**

**<sup>18</sup> Moses replied:**

**"It is not the sound of victory,  
it is not the sound of defeat;  
it is the sound of singing that I hear."**

**<sup>19</sup> When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. (Now I'm pretty sure that when Charlton Heston did this in The Ten Commandments, he threw them at the calf and there was an explosion, as if the tablets were made of C4. That's Hollywood!) <sup>20</sup> And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water**

**and made the Israelites drink it.** That's what's known as internalizing the lesson. What kind of a god is it that you can drink, and then expel from your own body?

Now if rebellion comes naturally, so does making excuses, and Aaron has a doozy:

<sup>21</sup> **He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"**

<sup>22</sup> **"Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. <sup>23</sup> They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' <sup>24</sup> So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"**

Sure it did. That's what comes naturally when you throw gold into a fire. If Jon Stewart had been around back then, he'd play a clip of Aaron saying that, and then quickly flash back to **verses 3-4** where it says: <sup>3</sup> **So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.**

The next part is very serious and very sad: <sup>25</sup> **Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. <sup>26</sup> So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him.** (Remember that Jacob had twelve sons and the third one was named Levi, and it is the tribe descended from him that rallied to Moses here. Moses and Aaron are Levites).

<sup>27</sup> **Then he said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.' "** <sup>28</sup> **The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. <sup>29</sup> Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."**

That is rough. These guys are commended for killing their own sons and brothers and friends and neighbors. It's one of those Scriptures that would have been edited out if the Bible were some book of propaganda that someone was making, because it's too hard to explain.

But this is a full-scale rebellion here, and were it to continue, it would wreck the salvation that God is bringing into the world through Israel. There are certain key moments like this in the Bible where God's judgment has to fall swiftly because there really is such a thing as Truth and it is in danger of being toppled by those who chase after false gods. I don't like this, but this is war, and war is a dirty business.

The great battle for the heart of Israel throughout the Old Testament is about this choice to follow either YHWH or to turn aside to idolatry. It is a long hard battle with many casualties along the way, but by the time of Jesus, idolatry was essentially gone from Israel. It had to go. It was that serious.

And there was a little more: <sup>30</sup> **The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."**

<sup>31</sup> **So Moses went back to the LORD and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. <sup>32</sup> But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."**

<sup>33</sup> **The LORD replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. <sup>34</sup> Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin."**

<sup>35</sup> **And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.**

Rebellion is simply the result of doing what comes naturally, and it is serious. And here's what hit me: I'm glad I don't live under the Old Testament Law, or in this period right before the Law was read, when the Law was in fact being given, when the people still knew right from wrong, but the Savior had not yet come and there was no final atoning sacrifice for our sin.

And here's what hit me too: I want to make sure all of you understand that we do not live in those days today. To hear some Christians talk, I think they'd like to take up swords against their sons and brothers and neighbors and friends and make some heads roll! And if they can't use swords, they'll cut them with words. That isn't who we are. Our marching orders are: "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." "Speak the truth in love". "Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

And one good reason to live this way is humility. He know rebellion comes easy. We know it firsthand. We rebel. How can we be hateful to others when we know our own need of the Savior?

And here's what hit me about that: We have something going for us that no one at the foot of Mt. Sinai had – the gift of the Holy Spirit, this treasure that God has given us in jars of clay. In **Galatians 5:16f**, Paul talks about how naturally rebellion takes over, and then he reminds us of the answer.

<sup>16</sup>**So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.** <sup>17</sup>**For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.** <sup>18</sup>**But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.**

<sup>19</sup>**The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;** <sup>20</sup>**idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions** <sup>21</sup>**and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

<sup>22</sup>**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,** <sup>23</sup>**gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.** <sup>24</sup>**Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.** <sup>25</sup>**Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.** <sup>26</sup>**Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.**

So: Rebellion against God is just the result of doing what comes naturally. It's easy to fall into rebellion, and even a gentle, polite rebellion is rebellion nevertheless. And rebellion is serious. I don't know how you could come away from **Exodus 32** with any other conclusion. There is a God. There is truth. Other gods lead you away from him, and your example can lead others away.

But along with truth, there is grace. There is the Gospel. God saves sinners. He fills with his Spirit those who he has made clean with the blood of the Lamb. And the fruit of the Spirit...love, joy, peace...means that God can replace our natural tendency to rebel with his supernatural desire to follow.

Rich Mullins wrote these words in the song Hold Me, Jesus:

Surrender don't come natural to me  
I'd rather fight You for something  
I don't really want

Than to take what You give that I need  
And I've beat my head against so many walls  
Now I'm falling down, I'm falling on my knees

### **Prayer and Invitation**