

# Deuteronomy 9:15-21

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*Moses continues to recount the molten calf incident at Mount Sinai. He reminds the Israelites of the time when he interceded on their behalf, so that the LORD might not destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven.*

Moses continues with the molten calf incident at Mount Sinai. He reminds the people of Israel he obeyed the LORD's command to go down quickly to intercede for them because they had acted corruptly by making for themselves a molten calf (vv. 7-14). He began by saying, *So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands.*

When Moses descended, the mountain was *burning with fire*, a description of how God often manifested Himself to His people ([Deuteronomy 4:12, 33, 36](#); [5:24-26](#)) but also perhaps a description of God's anger ([Exodus 32:10](#); [Deuteronomy 9:19](#)). When Moses came down to meet the Israelites, *the two tablets of the covenant were in his two hands*. But while carrying the two tablets of stone which confirmed God's covenantal relationship with His people, the covenant was already broken because one of its terms was violated. Moses stated, *And I saw that you had indeed sinned against the LORD your God. You had made for yourselves a molten calf*. Now Moses saw the idol with his own eyes.

The Suzerain God asked His vassals (Israel) to follow Him wholeheartedly in order to be blessed and to maintain the relationship He established with them ([Exodus 19:4-6](#)). The people agreed to the terms of the covenant and answered God together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" However, after agreeing with the covenant terms, the people decided to break it by making for themselves a *molten calf*. Moses noted they *had turned aside quickly from the way which the LORD had commanded them*.

It is likely that many of those hearing Moses' voice were either children or not yet born at the time of the incident of the *molten calf*. At this point the people had wandered for forty years, and all those of fighting age at the start of the wandering, people 20 and older, had now died. But the incident is still their heritage, and they need to learn from it. Moses reminded the people of his actions after seeing what they had done. He *took hold of the two tablets and*

*threw them from his hands and smashed them before their eyes.* Since the covenant was already broken, Moses also broke the stone “document” that contained the terms of the covenant. This was a common pattern in the ancient Near East in the case of treaty violation. Moses not only *threw* the covenant document, but he also *smashed them*. The verb “to smash” means “to cut into pieces.” Moses did that in order to annul the covenant (to declare it void) because the Israelites had violated one of its most important conditions.

Moses reminded the people that, after breaking the covenant document, he interceded for them. He *fell down before the LORD* right away. The phrase *at the first* can also be translated “as before.” Moses interceded for Israel, arguing that God would be diminished in the eyes of the Egyptians and other peoples if the nation perished. So God relented, and let the people live ([Deut 32:10-14](#)). Moses had already spent *forty days and nights* on the mountain without eating or drinking. Now he spent another *forty days and nights* and *neither ate bread nor drank water*. He engaged in this additional fast, *because of all the sin which Israel had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD to provoke Him to anger*. This is yet another miracle. God clearly sustained Moses’ life, going this long without food or water.

As leader and covenant mediator, Moses felt the responsibility to pray and fast on behalf of the Israelites to ask God to have mercy on them. Moses prayed and fasted for *forty days and nights*, without food or drink. Just as the Israelites sinned against the LORD during Moses’ original forty days of fasting on the mountain, so now Moses prayed and fasted again on behalf of the people for forty days in order to reverse the sinful consequences of their actions.

Moses gave the people the reason why he prayed and fasted on their behalf. He *was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the LORD was wrathful against them in order to destroy them*. As Moses had recounted, God had already proposed to wipe out the people and start over with him. So, he prayed and fasted, asking the LORD for mercy and forgiveness, not only for the people of Israel, but also for Aaron, the one who represented Moses in his absence and the one who made the molten calf ([Exodus 32:2-5, 21-24](#)). Moses noted that the *LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so he also prayed for Aaron at the same time*.

Moses’s prayer of confession and his fasting were preceded by Moses’ destruction of the idol with which Israel had sinned against their Suzerain God. Moses took their *sinful thing, the calf which they had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small until it was as fine as dust*. Then

Moses *threw its dust into the brook that came down from the mountain*. The gold came from ornaments given to them by the Egyptians. These ornaments became an idol. The idol became *dust* in a *brook*. It is an apt illustration that sin has costly consequences.

### **Biblical Text:**

**So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands.<sup>16</sup> And I saw that you had indeed sinned against the Lord your God. You had made for yourselves a molten calf; you had turned aside quickly from the way which the Lord had commanded you.<sup>17</sup> I took hold of the two tablets and threw them from my hands and smashed them before your eyes.<sup>18</sup> I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke Him to anger.<sup>19</sup> For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was wrathful against you in order to destroy you, but the Lord listened to me that time also.<sup>20</sup> The Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I also prayed for Aaron at the same time.<sup>21</sup> I took your sinful *thing*, the calf which you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small until it was as fine as dust; and I threw its dust into the brook that came down from the mountain.**