

Restoration by Intercession Exo. 32-33 FCC 7-19-20 Church in the Park

Today we are going to look at the story of Israel's first major sin, or more accurately, set of sins, in Exodus 32. What makes this story so powerful is that we see side by side the fullness of God's hatred of sin as well as the fullness of God's grace.

*Exo 32:1 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*

*Exo 32:2 So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."*

*Exo 32:3 So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.*

*Exo 32:4 And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*

*Exo 32:5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."*

*Exo 32:6 And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.*

*Exo 32:7 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.*

*Exo 32:8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"*

*Exo 32:9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.*

*Exo 32:10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."*

Moses had been called to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the law of God. But when his absence seemed to stretch out longer than the Israelites thought it should, the people panicked. All sorts of wild scenarios probably began to form in their minds, where the peace of God should have resided. They imagined Moses had been struck by lightning or killed by some other violent means. So they began to take matters into their own hands. How many times does our own impatience or our fear-based thinking get the best of us? That was their first sin.

Their reaction then was to replace God with other 'gods who would go before them'. Apparently, nobody remembered that Jacob and his sons had been through this routine many years before, as we looked at last week. So they pummel Aaron with questions and demands. They want a visible god to replace their invisible God and his absent representative. That's their second sin. The sheer treachery of this request is enough to make us, at this safe distance in time and space, express outrage on behalf of Moses and God. How could they?! But how often does our outrage over the sins of others greater than our outrage over our own sins?

Unfortunately, Aaron does not appear to even try at all to dissuade them from this idolatry. Instead he quickly asks for their gold and fashions a calf. It sounds like they had quite a bit of gold- even the sons had gold earrings. This is the same Aaron who had been consecrated as high priest to Yahweh. Ironically, he produces a calf that is a symbol of an Egyptian god and then announces a festival to the Lord, Yahweh. This is syncretism- a blending of religions. That's their third sin. But we cannot serve two masters. One will rise to the top and be our priority. Israel could not worship Yahweh and Apis, the bull-god. We cannot worship both God and any of the idols that our culture presents to us.

A fourth sin is total disregard for Moses' leadership- their words show disdain and cynicism. But they were so quick to forget all of the things God did through Moses as his appointed leader. They reject him so easily. Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker out there that says 'question all authority'. I assume that means all authority except the self-imposed authority of the author of that sticker!

The fifth sin is one committed by Aaron, and that is blasphemy. He presents the calf and declares 'these are your gods, o Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt'. That's the icing on the devil's food cake they have baked up. And then they decide that they can have their cake and eat it too, so the party begins.

Imagine how God feels at this point. Have you ever given someone a gift, an opportunity, a second chance, and they take advantage of it, and once they get what they want out of it, they push it and you aside? That's exactly what the people did here. God got them out of Egypt, through the red sea, out of Pharaoh's grasp, away from his chariots, after first getting Aaron and Moses to speak and act as his representatives and do miracles before Pharaoh. That's incredible.

And now here they are. Who could possibly blame God for wanting to destroy them and start over with just Moses? God started over before, and started from scratch with one man. He can do it again.

God sees all- it is vain to attempt to hide, ignore, excuse, or minimize our sinfulness. For example, God told Moses verbatim what Aaron and the Israelites were saying. We also see an example of God distancing himself from their sin- he tells Moses 'your people, whom you brought up from Egypt'. God also mocks the golden calf by calling the people 'stiff-necked', which was a metaphor referring to young bulls who resisted a yoke being put on them. The only thing keeping us from his restoring grace is our own stubbornness.

This situation sets us up to observe the grace of God at work. Nowhere else do we see such a stark contrast between the failure of human sinfulness and the limitless power of God's restoring grace.

The first way we see grace at work is in God's response to the prayer of Moses. At first it looks like God is long past any interest in negotiation. He tells Moses to leave him alone.

*Exo 32:11 But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?"*

*Exo 32:12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.*

*Exo 32:13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'"*

*Exo 32:14 And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*

This is interesting because it looks like God is commanding Moses not to pray, but God's statement has the opposite effect. God's statement actually indicates what one thing will keep him from pouring out his wrath, and that one thing is prayer. So instead of abandoning the people to God's wrath, Moses intercedes for them in prayer. This shows the power of God's grace at work through prayer. It has been said before that prayer moves the hand of God. Although God's wrath pulled him toward destroying Israel, the prayer of his faithful, humble servant pulled him even more toward grace.

To see even more of God's grace at work, we can look at this episode in light of the whole life of Moses. Here was a man whose raw passion for justice and his hot temper caused him to murder a man without hesitation. But now, after God treated Moses with patience and grace over and over again, Moses learned to have patience and grace as a leader. 40 years before this, Moses probably would have jumped at God's offer to destroy the people and start over with just

him. Our pride makes us vulnerable to such visions of grandeur and authority. But by this time Moses is a different man and shows no interest in this.

There is incredible depth in this brief but powerful prayer of Moses. His basic arguments are- you brought us this far already, don't let the Egyptians rejoice in our destruction, don't forget your covenant with Abraham. But each of these points are focused on God's glory and the sake of his great name. Moses points out God's power in bringing them this far, he points out what the Egyptians will say about him, and he points out the fact that God swore by his own self in his promise to Abraham. Moses is basically arguing that God will be glorified if he shows grace to his people. God is glorified when we ask for his grace and when he grants us his grace.

Now so far, Moses convinced God not to destroy his people. God did send a plague on them for making the calf. God's long-term solution then was to send an angel with the people to guide them through the wilderness rather than be with them personally.

*Exo 33:2 I will send an angel before you,*

*Exo 33:3(b) but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."*

God's point to Moses is that these people are stubborn and will sin again, which will make God want to destroy them again. Moses had told the people 'perhaps I can make atonement' for you. Moses is not doubting that atonement can be made. He is just not entirely sure that he would be the instrument of atonement through which the people could be reconciled to God. But again he intercedes for them.

*Exo 33:12 Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'*

*Exo 33:13 Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."*

*Exo 33:14 And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*

Moses interceded for the people once again, and God's presence was restored.

Two weeks ago we looked at the cry of the sons of Korah for revival and how repentance was the key. Last week we saw how Jacob and his family needed to abandon their idols and live in God's grace. Today we see an extreme example of sin and how God's grace was wider and deeper than that sin. Only when we acknowledge sin for what it is can we see the magnitude of the grace that cleanses us from that sin when we repent.

What's weighing on you today? You know, when we examine our own lives and we call our sin for what it is, we might tend to hide from God, to distance ourselves from him. We don't ask for grace because we feel so unworthy. It's easy to ask for grace when you don't have sin plaguing your conscience. Ironic, isn't it- that the times we need grace the most are the times we struggle to even ask for it? Did you know that God took care of that too?

The Israelites had Moses to intercede for them when they sinned. That does not mean that each Israelite did not need to repent and ask for grace themselves.

*Exo 32:33 But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book."*

This verse shows that to God, individual repentance and application of grace is essential. But you might wonder logically why they would need to do that themselves when it looks like Moses asked for grace for them already and it looks like God granted it already. Maybe an analogy is helpful here. Imagine you are travelling through the mountains- I for one wouldn't mind that right now- and you encounter a roadblock. Trees and rocks have covered the road. The park ranger already called it in and the highway department is removing the debris to reopen the road. But even if the road is open, it's still your choice whether or not to continue driving down the road

to your destination. Moses convinced God to show grace to his people- he opened the road to grace you could say. But each person still had to make their own choice to continue down that reopened road, to accept that grace.

*1Jn 2:1b ...if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

Jesus Christ is like Moses in the sense that he intercedes for his people and opens the road to grace. Christ did it not just for Israel but for all of us. Every time we sin, Christ intercedes for us. He goes to God on our behalf before we even go to God ourselves. If you sin and feel unworthy of God's grace, Jesus has already asked for God to give you grace, so why hold back from asking for it yourself? He opened the road already, just take your foot off the brake. Enter his grace and let the blessing of God's guiding and empowering presence go with you once again.