

## Who is on the Lord's Side?

Exodus 32:19-35

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 32, as we continue to study the story of the golden calf. We've looked previously at this idolatry of Israel and Moses' beautiful prayer of intercession in response, and in our previous study we raised some significant questions regarding how God responds to prayer, and whether or not we can change His mind.

When we sing the hymn, "Who is on the Lord's side," the hymn itself recalls something that Moses is going to say in this passage. Right in between God's giving of the command about worship in Exodus 25-31, and the implementation of those commands in Exodus 35-40, there is this interesting story, this tragic story, this story of sin and rebellion and apostasy of Israel against the very principles that God was busily giving to Moses on the mountain while they rebelled. And it's here for a very important reason. It's here to remind us of the importance of the worship of God, it is to remind us of the importance of responding to God's word in our worship of God, and it is there to remind us of the danger of falling away, of rebelling against God's word, and of going after other gods. This will be, as good students of the Old Testament know, a perennial threat in Israel. Over and over, the challenge of idolatry will test Israel, and so often Israel will be found wanting. It begins right here at the fountainhead, as the people of God have been brought to the mountain to worship the one true God. Their first act of worship after hearing the Ten Commandments from God's own mouth is an act of idolatry. It's absolutely mind-boggling. But of course, Paul tells us that this story is about us. He says, "These things were written so that we would not do like they did." So let's hear God's word here in Exodus 32. We'll begin in verse 19 tonight.

It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink it. Then Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you, that you have brought such great sin upon them?" Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord burn; you know the people yourself, that they

are prone to evil. For they said to me, 'Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control--for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies-- then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. He said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.'" So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day. Then Moses said, "Dedicate yourselves today to the LORD--for every man has been against his son and against his brother--in order that He may bestow a blessing upon you today." On the next day Moses said to the people, "You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. "But now, if You will, forgive their sin--and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!" The LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. "But go now, lead the people (where I told you. Behold, My angel shall go before you; nevertheless in the day when I punish, I will punish them for their sin." Then the LORD smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made.

Let's pray.

*Our Lord, even in the grim humor of this passage, our hearts are sobered for these are our spiritual cousins and forefathers; these are they which had seen things which boggle the mind. And yet they strayed. Teach us from Your holy word and guide us O great Jehovah, for our hearts are prone to wander, Lord, we feel it; prone to leave the God we love. So here's our heart take and seal it for your courts above even as we hear and respond in obedience to your word. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.*

In Exodus 32:15, Moses begins to go down the mountain. Verses 15-18 now set the stage for the mediator to catch Israel red handed in the midst of sin. He's going down from the mountain with the tablets of God in his hand. These are the words which God had not only spoken to Israel with His own mouth, if I can speak in that way, but He had also written it down with His own finger. These laws, the essence of the moral law of God, distilled in the Ten Commandments He had given to Moses. He had spoken it to the people and then He had been elaborating it as He communed with Moses on the mountain for forty days.

As Moses is making His way down the mountain with these tablets in His hand, in verse 17 he meets Joshua on the way. And Joshua is a standing reminder that it wasn't an impossible task for Israel to wait for forty days because Joshua was waiting too. He was somewhere on that mountain. He wasn't at the top with Moses but he was waiting there faithfully. It had been forty days for him just like it had been forty days for the people down in the valley, but Joshua had remained faithful and Moses meets him.

As they go back and they hear this noise and Joshua thinks there's been an attack; there must be an invading army and we've either won or lost. It's either the sound of victory or the sound of defeat. And Moses says, "Joshua, that's not the sound of army; that's not the sound of cries of defeat or victory. That's the sound of singing and it's not the kind of singing that you're going to be pleased with." Moses had already been told what was going on. Moses knows more than Joshua about the situation because God had revealed it to him. So Moses is basically saying, "It's not war, Joshua. Oh, that it were. It's worse than that. It's an idolatrous, cultic orgy." And sure enough, they get to the base to the camp and Moses sees sin with God's eyes. And when Moses has been on the mountain, he's been approaching God as the mediator on behalf of God's people urging God to restrain His immediate judgment against the people of God, but now he sees what God had told him about and the ugly reality of it hits home and he sees it and he destroys the idol in accordance with the law.

### **I. Moses sees sin with God's eyes and destroys the idol in accordance with the law.**

And in verses 19 and 20, we see the actions of the mediator. Moses now sees for himself what he had heard about from God and he sees the idol and this orgiastic activity; this dancing which implies some sort of lasciviousness in the way that it is stated here, and he burns. Isn't it interesting, He sees this and "Moses' anger burned." Where is the last time you've heard that? It was when God announced to Moses that He was burning with anger against Israel. And Moses is now seeing Israel's sin from God's perspective. Before, he had been in the role of mediator on behalf of the people appealing for clemency, appealing for mitigation for the people of God over against the just judgment of God. Now however, he represents God to the people and he sees the sin as God saw that sin and he throws the tablets from his hands. The precious tablets, the sign of the covenant relationship between God and Israel, the sign of the holiness which God intended Israel to embody in its individual and corporate life, and he throws them to the ground and smashes them.

And you need to understand that this is not an act of a flare of anger; this isn't a sudden outbreak of histrionics for Moses. This is a ceremonial action. Everybody in that culture would understand what was being done. The visible symbol of the

covenant relationship between God and His people is being destroyed, and when Moses does that it conveys three things all at once. It shows Israel just what they had done when they had worshiped that idol. They had broken the covenant in the breaking of God's law. Now, that's not the only thing that Israel will learn about a broken covenant in this passage. Later they will learn that you don't break the covenant; the covenant breaks you. Secondly, it shows that God was in the right to effect any of the threatened sanctions of the covenant against them. If He had wiped them all out then, He would have had every right because they had violated the relationship in the most fundamental possible way.

We're going to talk about a phrase that you've already noticed in your English translation repeated at least three times, *the great sin*. Well, that's near eastern speak too. And it's very, very specific both in the Old Testament and in the near east. What that means is that they had fundamentally violated the relationship with God and they deserved His immediate judgment.

But thirdly, Moses breaking those tablets visibly indicates a divine repudiation of the covenant relationship. It's God saying, "You go after other gods; that's fine. This is over." You see, all of this conspires to show the extreme gravity, the urgency of this situation. The sinfulness of what the people had done. Moses' visible action in the breaking of those tablets stressed that in a way that nothing else could have.

But Moses isn't done with breaking. He's got some more breaking to do in verse 20. This verse indicates a symbolic repudiation of the idol. Not only had the covenant been violated, but now Moses is going to violate that idol. You remember, that on the mountain, as God was communing with Moses, in Exodus 23:24, He said, "Moses, if My people love Me and follow Me, here's what they're going to do when they run across an idol. They're going to utterly annihilate it." And what is the first thing that Moses does when he sees that idol? He utterly annihilates it. Scholars will nit pick about the combination of words. He burned it with fire and ground it to powder. And they'll say you can't melt something down and then grind it to powder. I want to say two things to that. First, we have language like this from other cultures, and the language is symbolic language to indicate the utter annihilation of a particular object, usually an object used in worship. So everybody who heard that would understand precisely what is being said. It's saying that Moses pulverized it out of existence, however he did it.

The second thing is to say that God has already told Israel that that is what they ought to do when they run into an idol. So, in light of that, what we're being told here is that this idol, which was such an affront to God, has been utterly destroyed by Moses in accordance with God's law. And then the powder itself is sprinkled into the water supply of Israel so that Israel is forced to ingest her god.

But it also points forward to another very odd law in the Book of Numbers. Do you remember what is to be done with the wife whose husband suspects her of

adultery? She is to drink of water which has been mixed with the dust of the floor of the sanctuary, and the doing of it will reveal whether she is innocent or guilty. And so I suspect that the other thing that is being said here is, "Israel, you're an adulteress." And she's being brought in before God to be judged for her spiritual adultery. That's the first thing we see, these actions of the mediator in verses 19 and 20.

## **II. Aaron's blame shifting reminds us of the Fall and reveals the insidiousness of sin.**

Then in verses 21 through 24 we see Moses' interrogation of Aaron, and Aaron's blame shifting reminds us of the fall, doesn't it? You are right back there with Adam and Eve in the garden with Aaron's tall tales and it reveals the insidiousness of sin, doesn't it?

Moses begins in verse 21 by giving Aaron the benefit of the doubt. What must they have done to you to get you to do this? I mean, did they torture you? Did they hold a knife to your throat? Did they threaten to kill your sons and daughters before your wife? What did they do to you, Aaron, that you would lead them into this kind of sin? Moses is saying, "Surely Aaron, they forced you to do this somehow. Surely you didn't voluntarily go along with this. Surely you didn't help them along the way."

And then notice the language, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?" Now, when the culture around Israel used the phrase *great sin*, it was always applied in marital situation to adultery on the part of the unfaithful partner. It was *the great sin*. But in the Old Testament, four times when that phrase is used outside of this passage, it is always used for idolatry. And so Moses is saying, "How could you, Aaron, designed to be a leader of God's people, have led them into idolatry, the greatest repudiation of God that one can possibly imagine."

And Aaron comes back with a three-part reply. In verse 22 he gives a profoundly true statement, but he uses it for self-justification. He says, "Moses, you know how the people are; they're prone to wander. They're prone to evil; they're prone to leave the God they love. It's their fault. I didn't have anything to do with it. It was their idea." It was true. Israel was prone to evil. It is a profoundly important statement about the heart of man which is a perpetual idol factory. Aaron is acknowledging that. It's true that Moses knows it, but it is not an excuse for Aaron. That's why God gave Aaron to Israel to keep them back from that which they were prone to, not to help them into it. Aaron should have died before he led the people of God into this.

Secondly, in the very next verse Aaron seems to attempt to mitigate what had been done. Listen to his language. "They said to me make a god for us who will

go before us for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” In other words, “Look Moses, this really wasn't an image of God; it was designed to be a physical representation of His presence with us and in some way to replace you, His appointed mediator, who was absent from the people of God at the time that they wanted to worship.” And Moses says, “God has forbidden the usage of an image in His worship in any way, shape, or form. What part of the second commandment, Aaron, did you not understand?”

And thirdly, and finally, Aaron invents what is either a colossal lie claiming the miraculous creation of this idol or, it is some sort of an idiomatic expression, a near Eastern-ism which is expressing his embarrassment. He realizes that he really messed up in making this calf, and so, he sort of says, “Well, you know it went in and —poof!—you know, there it was.”

But either way, Aaron's attempts at self-justification and self-protection are a picture of how sin infects us and makes us think, and they are a picture of how indefensible our excuses will sound before God. You know how lame these excuses sound when you read them in the light and safety of this sanctuary when you, thank God, have not committed this sin today.

Just think how other excuses will sound in the light of the judgment day. “But you don't know how hard she was to live with, God. I really wasn't grasping at power and money all my life. I really did care about you, Lord, I was just busy. There's so many needs in the world and so many demands, how could you have expected me to show attention to those people?” In that great day there will be many excuses which will seem to be what they are—lame—just like Aaron's. And we're reminded of that here in the interrogation of Aaron.

### **III. The proto-ministry as the instrument of God's visitation of justice.**

But there's a third thing I want you to see. In verses 25-29, we see the Levites co-opted for the judgment of God against Israel--this proto-ministry. Remember, they haven't been appointed as priests yet. The priesthood hasn't been appointed, but this incident will play a role in the appointment of Levi in the ministry of the priesthood. This proto-ministry is used as the instrument of God's visitation of His justice on Israel. In verse 25, we see the situation described from God's perspective. We've had to endure Aaron's waffling for three verses, and so just to clear our minds just in case we had become confused by this equivocation that Aaron was handing out, God just sort of restates it all for us. “Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control, for Aaron had let them get out of control, to the derision among their enemies, then Moses stood in the gate of the camp.” You see, God's just saying, “Let me just show you where we are again just in case you had forgotten from this description that Aaron just gave. They're out of control!”

Moses now says in verse 26, "It's time to choose. You're going to worship God's way, or you're going to worship Him *your* way; line up. Which side?" And his own tribe, Levi, comes to him. That's the tribe Moses came from. And they gather around him and he doesn't say, "OK, let's go preach." He says, "Strap your swords on, men." And here's your words. Somehow, perhaps because some of the people were openly unrepentant and could be identified; or, perhaps because some of them were known ring leaders and could be identified; or, perhaps because of the ground idol powder in the water had been used by God in the same way that the test of Numbers 5 had been used to identify an adulteress had been used to identify certain of the idolaters in Israel; but somehow the ringleaders or some portion of the idolaters were going to be made known to Levi.

And here is Moses' instruction. If it's your friend, if it's your neighbor, if it's your brother, if it's your son and God shows you an idolater, kill him. One commentator said the scene is this: "They are rioting after Moses has destroyed the calf and he just sort of sends the Levites out in a charge, in a rush, and they kill everyone at random." That's not what the passage says. About 3,000 die, but the 3,000 are those who have somehow been identified as idolaters. Maybe they were ringleaders. Maybe they were still unrepentant. But what is happening? The visitation of judgment is being brought against them and God is saying to the Levites, "Now we're going to find out whether you really will follow Me." We're going to find out whether you mean it when I ask, "Who is on the Lord's side? and you say, 'I am.'" Because whether it's your brother, or your friend or your neighbor, or your child; if they are against Me, kill them.

This presages and in part explains the appointment of Levi to the priesthood because they chose God over men—even the dearest men to them in the world. Levi in the backdrop of apostasy and idolatry and betrayal illustrates the kind of covenant loyalty that God demands. Levi illustrates what Aaron should have illustrated. You will have to kill me before I will make an idol," should have been Aaron's response. Levi was ready to part with kith and kin out of loyalty to God. Do you see how absolute that demand of loyalty is? How utterly alien that is to us today. It seems cruel, it seems unreasonable, it seems jealous, it seems small, and it's none of those things, because we were made to worship the one true God. And going after something else in some other way is the ultimate act of betrayal. And the Levites bring a picture of the final judgment into this very passage.

#### **IV. The heart of the mediator is once again revealed in his prayer.**

Then again, in verses 30-35, the heart of the mediator is revealed, and we Moses entreat the Lord. He speaks to the Lord of the whole people as violators of the covenant, he confesses their specific sins, and in verse 31 he gives it a name,

*the great sin.* They've committed the great sin. He acknowledges the gravity of it, they've made a god of gold for themselves. It's the great sin. But perhaps forgiveness can be found. Forgiveness in this case means the commuting of the death sentence against the nation.

So what does he plea? God had said to Moses that He would set the people aside, and make a people of you. And Moses responds, "Lord, forgive them. Commute the sentence. Don't destroy them. But if You don't, then hear this prayer. Kill me with them. They're my people." And you're seeing there how the mediator identifies with his people, and you're seeing a little of the foretaste of Jesus Christ saying, "Lord, that sin is not hers, it's Mine, judge Me for it. That guilt is not his, it's mine, judge Me for it." For what Moses could not do, substitute for the people of God, Jesus Christ could and did and has, and that's the glory of the new covenant, isn't it? That we should get the same thing that they got, and Christ invites it, experiences it, and endures it for us. Let's pray.

*O Lord, You lay us low when You show us our hearts and our sins and what our sins deserve, and then when we see the glory of our Mediator, it doesn't make sense, and yet we thank You for this glorious and incomprehensible grace, for it's our only hope. Help us, O God, not to leave this place without casting our hopes and our trust on that Mediator who is our only hope, this we ask in His name, Amen.*

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