

Sin at Sinai

Exodus 32:1-10

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Open your Bibles please to Exodus 32, as we continue to work our way through this great book. You may remember that from Exodus 25 to 31, God in great detail explains the structure at which He will meet with His people in worship, and the way in which His people must come to Him in worship. So, the totality of that section is given over to the subject of how you meet with and worship God, and how you give glory to God.

Now, that is a profound irony in light of our present text, because as Moses is up on top of the mountain, hearing in intricate detail how God has provided for and taken initiative for His people so that they might come into His presence, down at the bottom of the mountain, His people are taking initiative to decide how they are going to come into His presence. And this constitutes one of the great crises in the history of the nation of Israel. It is certainly to this point the greatest crisis in the history of the nation of Israel, and maybe at least one of the most significant crises over the whole history of Israel. So significant is this crisis that Israel could have ended on the spot. So let's turn to Exodus 32 and this story that we have come to know as the Golden Calf, and let us hear God's word:

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Now 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." So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. Then the

LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.

"They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. "Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we sense the crisis of this traumatic event, but more than that, this awful rebellion of Your people against You, even as we read these words. And it troubles our hearts that we see in ourselves the seeds of just this kind of a rebellion. Through Your apostle You warned us not to make the mistakes of the children of Israel in the wilderness. Surely, this warning is for us as well. We pray that You would speak to us by Your word, that You would shake us from our native impatience and idolatry, and that You would cause us to trust in You alone and to worship You alone and to worship You in the way that You have called us to worship You, for we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

There are several huge themes that circulate through this section. We are in a new, distinctive section of the book of Exodus. Think of it: from Exodus 25-31 there are the instructions for tabernacle and worship. In Exodus 35-40, there is the account of those instructions being carried out by Israel under the careful watch of Moses, and finally in Exodus 40, at the very end of that chapter, there is the indwelling of God in the tabernacle, which He had instructed the children of Israel to make. And right in the middle of that long section, from Exodus 25 to Exodus 40, dealing with the worship of God and tabernacle, there is the story of how Israel violated everything that God had them to do, everything that God had told His people to do in Exodus 20 in the Ten Commandments, and everything He had been telling Moses about from Exodus 25-31. surely there's no mistake there. That passage is there for a purpose, to illustrate a vitally important principle, and we will see several themes running through that section from Exodus 32-34, which contains the account of the Golden Calf, God's response to the Golden Calf, Moses' response and intercession, God's mercy, God's response, and the covenant renewal with Israel, all those things are contained in this very exciting section of the second half of the book of Exodus. Exodus 25-31 can be somewhat tedious, if Exodus 35-40 can be somewhat challenging, even to the most avid student of the Scriptures, then Exodus 32-34 is the stuff of movies. This would make a great addition to the Ten Commandments.

Let's look briefly at several of these themes. This whole section highlights the

person, the role, the importance of the mediator. Without a mediator, you understand, Israel does not survive this incident. That's the whole point of Exodus 32. Without a mediator, without the man Moses, appointed by God, who has now, after walking with God for many years, after learning what God is like, this man Moses is beginning to become like his God in his compassion, in his love for God's people. And without that man, Israel does not exist after Exodus 32:10. Moses is the instrument that God chooses to use to be the conveyor of God's mercy to His people. So the importance, the role, the person of the mediator is highlighted in this passage. If God's voice in Exodus 20 gave Israel just a taste of how badly they needed a mediator, well, this story in Exodus 32 seals their apprehension that they need a mediator. After Exodus 32:10 and after their encounter with the Living God, they certainly know they need a divinely appointed mediator, and throughout this passage the crucial role of Moses as mediator is put before our eyes. Of course, that points forward and begins to preexplain the crucial role of a greater Mediator, of whom Moses is only a shadow, a vague foreshadowing of the Mediator to come.

Another theme is the doctrine of sin. One commentator said, "This is another story of the fall." Now, we could actually quibble with the way he puts this, but surely this observation is correct. Like the story of the fall in Genesis 3, like the story of the rebellion of the people of the earth before the time of Moses in Genesis 6, like the story of the rebellion in the days of Babel, we see here a unique insight in the exceeding sinfulness of sin, even in God's people. These are God's covenant people, and remember, they have said three times, "Yes, Lord, we will follow You and we will do it Your way." Give them 40 days apart from Moses, and they're worshipping a golden ox. Forty days apart from the mediator, and they have broken the covenant. This is a fall story, it's story of Israel's breaking the covenant, and is it not a great warning to all of us who have grown up under the privileges of the visible church. Just because we're under the privileges of the visible church, is no basis for presumption. These people had had an encounter with the living God, they had heard something that you and I have never heard, the voice of God, and in less than 40 days they were following after another one.

Thirdly, this section does not highlight Moses having a greater compassion for God's people than God has for His people. This passage does not teach that Moses loves God's people more than God does. Rather, this passage highlights that Moses is now embracing the prior compassion of God. In Exodus 3, and Moses tells us this on purpose, when God came to Moses and said, "Moses, I have such a heart for My people, that I'm going to bring them out of bondage and I'm going to use you to do it," do you remember Moses' response? "That's great Lord, who are You going to send?" And Moses, frankly, doesn't care whether they rot in Egypt, and God has to convince him that he needs to give his life, if need be, to help bring the children of Israel out of Egypt. What's Moses doing there? Moses is letting you know that long before he had a heart for the people of God, that God had a heart for the people of God. And what God let's you see in

exodus 32, is a man who is beginning to have an inkling of the love of God for God's people. And God gives Moses the privilege of arguing against Him in the display of this love for His people. We see Moses embrace the compassion of God in this task as the mediator, and thus we see something of his personal growth in grace, as well as his discovery of the character of God and the meaning of God's word and promise. So all of those themes we will see in this passage.

The first thing we see in verses 1-6 is Israel's rebellion against the covenant of God. The second we see in verses 7-10, and that is God's revelation to Moses of this rebellion, and His response to Israel's betrayal and disobedience.

I. We can't take the worship of God into our own hands.

Israel's rebellion against the covenant of their God is recounted. We see here that we cannot take the worship of God into our own hands. In verse 1 we see that Israel is impatient. When the people saw that Moses delayed coming down the mountain, the people assembled around Aaron. They are impatient at the long delay and they come to Aaron. By the way, the phrase that says, "they assembled around him," is not a nice, happy fraternal phrase. It's the same situation when a group of bullies is going to beat you up. It's a menacing phrase. They gather around Aaron, as it were, to threaten him. "Aren't you going to do something now that this fellow has gone?" And they come to him, not only looking for a visible representation of deity, but they come to him essentially looking for a new mediator. "This man up on the mountain obviously isn't coming back. We need a new mediator." And they're quite happy to have an inanimate mediator if necessary, a golden calf in his stead. The people's request seems to be not a request for a different god and a god other than the Lord, rather a representation of God. They wanted something visible upon which they could fix their attention and hope. It was symbolic, it was representative of the God who had brought them out of Egypt.

So the people, in verse 1, speak very disrespectfully and dismissively of Moses. The people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled around Aaron, and look what they say, "Come make us a god, for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt." It's as if they're saying, "this guy Moses, old what's his name." He's only been gone forty days, but he's now this man. That's how disrespectful they are about this mediator. And it's extremely ironic, my friends, because we need to realize that the one man standing between them and their utter destruction by the wrath of God is old what's his name. They've forgotten him, but Moses has fallen in love with them, by God's grace, and he will be ready to offer his life for theirs if God will just show them mercy. How beautiful is this picture of our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. The foreshadowing of the One who comes, the great Mediator, and though we are faithless, He is faithful.

But it gets worse. Aaron facilitates their request. Why, we're not told. The rabbis came up with all kinds of excuses for Aaron, but the Bible never gives an excuse. It does not explain why he did what he did, but let me tell you one thing, he doesn't come out of this story looking good. He facilitates the request. Some of the spoil of the Egyptians is used to create the idol; the earrings of the people are brought in. Notice that verse 3 explicitly tells you that this is a well nigh universal rebellion, because who comes to him? All the people. All the people come to him, and Aaron makes a young golden bull or ox. Don't let the word *calf* throw you off. Now, maybe that's a reflection of the worship of the bull god in Egypt, maybe it's a reflection of Baal worship in Canaan, maybe it's a foreshadowing of the bulls of Jeroboam, but whatever the case is, he identifies it with or as the god that had brought them up out of the land of Egypt.

This is a do-it-yourself god, a do-it-yourself representation of god, a do-it-yourself symbol of his presence with the people of God, and Aaron then proceeds to make a do-it-yourself altar and sanctuary, and institute a do-it-yourself priesthood and do-it-yourself worship. Notice here, we have all the components of a *cultus*, of a practice of religion. We've got a representation of deity, an altar, a tabernacle, a priesthood, and a feast day. All of these are set up. This is an outright rebellion against what God had said in both the first and second commandments just days before.

In verse 6, the feast day comes and the people worship their self-derived god in their self-derived way, and guess what happens. Gross immorality. Notice the connection, false worship to false living. False worship, false piety, false living. They rose up to play. There are sexual overtones here. This is an orgy that is beginning. It, perhaps, symbolizes the kind of orgies that were often related to Canaanite worship of fertility gods, and we see this chain between false worship to impiety to immorality.

And in this passage we learn how important worship is to God, and there are several applications that flow from that principle and its violation in the event of the golden bull or golden ox. First, we learn that impatience is the enemy of faith. The people were impatient at the delay of Moses, and so they take matters into their own hands. Their impatience becomes the enemy of their faith. Surely, there is a lesson for us in that. When we are in the midst of times when the Lord says to us, "Wait," what is one of our greatest struggles? To patiently wait until the Lord gives the answer. We want the answer, and we want it now. We want it now and we want it on our schedule. We'll fit it in between 12:15 and 12:35. And the people of God were impatient and disaster resulted.

Notice also this passage reminds us that we can't choose our own mediator. Only God can choose the mediator. The people tried to choose their mediator, the representation, the thing that was going to channel between themselves and God, was now going to be this golden calf. It doesn't work that way. You don't

relate to, you don't experience, you don't worship, you don't commune with, you don't fellowship with the living God except through His mediator. You can't come up with your own. There's no do it yourself mediator in God's kingdom.

Thirdly, we can't picture the true God as we wish to, as we want to, as we will; God will reveal Himself in the way He wants to reveal Himself, and one of the prime sins of this passage is in the direct violation of the second commandment in which these people decide, "No, we'll picture God like we want to. We'll relate to God, we'll craft Him according to our own imaginations."

Fourthly, we can't worship the true God and something else too. There may have been some people in that multitude that were viewing the golden calf as a representation of a deity alongside of the God of Israel, or they may have been others, maybe it was the majority, who viewed the golden calf as an instrument whereby they could worship the true God of Israel. Either way, it doesn't matter. They put something alongside of God that has become an object of worship, and in this passage it is very clear that is not legitimate. God will not tolerate it.

Notice also, fifthly, that we cannot worship the true God except in the way that He commands. The people of Israel take an unbiblical initiative here. Instead of waiting for God's word of command to them about how they were to approach Him, they themselves take matters into their own hands and end up worshipping wrongly because they don't worship Him in His way.

Then, notice that false worship leads to false living, to immorality. Worshipping God, even attempting to worship the God of Israel in a pagan way results in the paganization of God's people. One commentator says, "At every key point the people's building project contrasts with the tabernacle that God has just announced to Moses. This gives to the account a heavy, ironic contrast." And he points out eight contrasts. "The people seek to create what God had already provided." God had already provided a way into fellowship with Him, a way to worship Him, and they try to create an alternate way. Secondly, they, rather than God, take the initiative in this, whereas throughout, God stresses that He's the one who takes initiative to bring His people to Him in mercy.

Third, offerings are demanded by Aaron rather than given willingly, as in the building of the tabernacle. Aaron says, "Everyone, I need all your earrings." But in Exodus 35, when the tabernacle is built, what is said? "Come and freely give what you will to the building of god's tabernacle." Isn't it interesting how what is done in our initiative becomes a bondage, whereas doing what God has said is freeing and liberating. Notice also, the elaborate preparations of Exodus 25-31 for worship are entirely missing. This is a slipshod operation here. It's thrown together in a matter of hours. Moses had to spend 40 days listening to God recount in detail how He was to be worshiped.

Fifth, notice the painstaking length of time needed for the building of the

tabernacle, was going to become an overnight rush job for this beast. Seventh, the invisible, intangible God of Exodus 20, becomes a visible, tangible image, and eighth, the personal, active God becomes an impersonal object that cannot see, or speak or act. The ironic effect is that the people forfeit the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves by creating the golden calf. At the heart of the matter, the most important of the commandments had been violated.

II. We need to clearly see God's view of our sin and the consequences of it before we truly understand the need for a mediator.

In verses 7-10, we have God's revelation to Moses of what's taking place, and God's response to Israel's betrayal and disobedience. We need to clearly see God's view of our sin and its consequences, before we truly understand the need for a mediator.

In verse 7 God knows what is taking place, even though Moses does not. So God tells Moses to go down and see for himself, and God uses the language of atonement. Do you recall how the Children of Israel had disowned Moses? "That man who brought us out of the land." Now, God disowns them. It is not He who brought them out of the land, but to Moses, "Go talk to those people you brought out of the land." It's the language of disowning, and it's ironic in light of the people's words about Moses.

Then, in verse 8, God accurately and specifically nails them in their crime: they have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. Specifically they have done this by making and worshiping an idol and claimed it to be the saving god of Israel. Notice, they did it quickly. There's the impatience. Second, they turned aside from the way. God doesn't say, "You turned aside from Me," but He says, "You turned aside from My way." In other words, "You turned aside from the way I told you to do it. You didn't do it the way I said." Now, in doing that they had turned away from Him, but it's interesting that He doesn't say, "You turned away from Me," but "You turned away from the way I told you to do it."

Third, "which I commanded them." He says you have broken My directives given to you in the Ten Commandments. My friends, when Moses comes down and breaks the tablets, don't think that Moses is having a hissy fit. This is not Moses' in the throes in histrionics, out of control. This is not Moses needing a little dose of lithium or Paxil or Prozac. This is Moses visibly symbolizing what the children of Israel have already done. They've broken the relationship with God.

Fourthly, He says, specifically they've done this by making and worshiping an idol. They've contradicted the first and second commandments, and they've claimed it to be the saving God of Israel, thus demeaning the one true God. And the Lord tells Moses, "I've seen Israel." Now, that doesn't mean "I saw them

doing this,” but it means, “I know what they’re like.” This is similar to when Jesus said that He didn't entrust Himself to men because He knew what was in men. God's saying, “I've seen these people. I know what they're like in their hearts, I know exactly what they're doing.” And He goes on to say in verse 9, “They're stubborn; they want to do things their way, rather than the Lord's.”

Now, here's the interesting point. In verse 10, the Lord gives a four part directed verdict announcement. First, He says, “Leave Me alone.” Now, this is not “Leave me alone,” slam! I'm inside my room, don't come after me, dad.” This is not your teenage son or daughter getting mad that you've disciplined them and slamming the door and going away, saying, “Leave me alone.” No. This is God saying, “Moses, don't come interceding to Me.” This is interesting because, a., that's precisely what Moses is going to do, but b., it's interesting because God knew that was precisely what Moses was going to do because He had seen Moses' heart as a mediator growing. He had been crafting Moses' heart by grace, and He knew that Moses' instinctive response was going to be to come to Him and to intercede, so he says, “Leave me alone.” Then he says, “That My anger may burn against him.” Israel's actions deserved the burning anger of God. Anger of God intimates the need for some sort of satisfaction of these crimes. This passage will talk about Moses' intercession for these crimes. It won't talk about God's satisfaction for these crimes. That points to the need for atonement.

Thirdly, He goes on to say, “That I may destroy them.” Israel's rebellion had earned the right to be destroyed by God. That would have been just. And finally, “I will make a great nation of you.” In other words, God says, Moses, those promises that I gave to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 15 and 17 and reiterated in 18 and 21 and other places, I'll just give those to you. In other words, God's plan is going to go on. Israel, by its disobedience, can't mess up God's plan, but Israel can miss out on God's blessings. They can't thwart the sovereign plan of God, but they can miss out on God's blessings. This whole section is bad news, isn't it? But you can't understand the good news until you've understood the bad news first. The attitude that says, “Oh, God will forgive. That's His job. That's the wrong attitude.”

Coming to grips with this passage, the violation of the covenant and its cataclysmic consequences is absolutely necessary. We deserve to be disowned. We deserve to be cut off. It's coming to grips with these passages that help us to understand just how great grace is. It's deeper and wider and better than we can possibly imagine. And until we look at these passages and put ourselves in this situation, and see ourselves and our own hearts in this life, then we are incapable of seeing the greatness of God's mercy to us in Jesus Christ. And so, we'll continue that story the next time we come together, God willing. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we see ourselves in Israel and Israel in ourselves. We shake our heads and say, “How could you have forgotten so quickly?” Then we walk out of this room and we forget quickly. We need your grace and your

forgiveness. Help us to know that and to understand it, to seek it in Christ and to find it by your grace and mercy. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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