

Revolt! *Exodus 32*

Introduction

Exodus 32-34 is really one unity within this book. Though we are going to spend the next three weeks on these three chapters, I still want you to see it as a whole. From a top-down look, there are three primary subjects in this passage, three scenes from a very familiar play, a repetitive pattern in the life of Israel, to this point in their history, and, unfortunately, going forward: rebellion, mediation, and restoration.

Israel rebels against God, disregarding God's gracious presence and work. God sets out to judge his people, punishing them justly for their sin. Moses stands before God as Israel's mediator, pleading for God's grace and forgiveness. God responds to Moses' intervention. Though he will still punish Israel, he restores Israel in keeping with the covenant he made with the people.

The theme before us in chapter 32 is rebellion, open revolt against God. We have a terrible incongruity in this passage. God has miraculously brought the people out of Egypt. He has delivered them through the Red Sea, destroying the pursuing Egyptian army. Now, he is revealing himself to Moses in order to deliver his law, his commandments, his statutes to guide the people in their worship and conduct.

In this midst of this holy time, in the midst of God manifesting his presence with Israel, a terrible incident occurs along with gross immoral behavior. Paul refers to this incident in his letter to the Corinthians:

Do not be idolaters as some of them were (speaking of the Israelites); as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." – *I Corinthians 10:7*

This experience of rebellion would be recalled later by the psalmist. Turn in your Old Testament to Psalm 106 – Psalm 106:19-23

Moses is up on the mountain, receiving the tablets on which God has written the Ten Commandments. Here were the conditions, the requirements for the people in the context of the covenant God was making with the people.

Exodus 31:18

Here's where the problem begins – Exodus 32:1-6

The situation is more ominous, more strident, than what our English translation suggests. A more literal rendering of the Hebrew text in verse one would be “The people gathered together against Aaron....” Peter Enns writes:

This was not a friendly group coming to make a request but a hostile group, perhaps threatening Aaron into compliance.

This certainly does not excuse Aaron or exonerate him from guilt in his actions. He had been up on the mountain with Moses in the presence of God. Look back at Exodus 23:9-11.

Perhaps the lengthy time of Moses’ absence has him also questioning what is happening and what will happen if indeed Moses has gone missing.

We see the disdain with which the people held Moses in their view – and not for the first time either. “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.” We might also add, “And we don’t really care either.” You can just feel the contempt dripping from their tongues as they speak of Moses.

Aaron gives in. I’m not sure he even tried to dissuade the people. He took gold from the people and fashioned a golden calf. Now, the calf was not a replacement for Yahweh, but a misrepresentation of Yahweh. It was a false representation, one in the form of an Egyptian god. Israel here is breaking the second commandment. Here is what God had said to Israel:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.
– *Exodus 20:4-5*

We see here the power of idolatry to deceive. The visible is more powerful than the invisible in our mind. The image stirs the imagination and emotion more than the concept. Look what God says to Moses:

Exodus 32:7-8

Moses is up on Mount Sinai to receive the commandments while the people wait below. To them, God is silent. When God is silent and, it appears to us, indifferent to our needs, the climate is ripe for idolatry – something or someone else to put our trust in. Erwin Lutzer writes:

Where we turn when we are desperate speaks volumes about where we are in our walk with God. Whether we draw closer to God or turn away from him depends on how well we know him. When we feel God has failed, an idol stands ready to deliver us.

Shocking, isn't it, how depravity could break out in the midst of holiness. You wonder how they could so clearly and recently experience the hand of God, the redemption of God, and then fall into idolatrous worship.

But, is it really so strange? David, described in Scripture as "a man after God's own heart," falls into sexual sin, trying to cover it up even to the point of murder. Ananias and Sapphira, in the infant church, were not far removed from the death and resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Think of the disastrous moral failings of the Corinthian Christians even though they exercised all the spiritual gifts.

Bernard Ramm says it well:

None of us is far from Egypt! ...Israel marched out of Egypt, but Egypt didn't march out of Israel.

This is really our experience often as believers in Christ, isn't it? Paul describes this clearly in his letter of Romans – Romans 7:18-24.

Exodus 32 shows how a decline from faith in God leads to a decline in morality. Once Israel abandoned faith in God and in his man Moses, turning to idolatry, what followed was immorality. Paul describes this disintegrating downward spiral in Romans, chapter 1. He shows how the experience of the Gentile world parallels what Israel was going at Sinai.

Romans 1:18-32

Let's go back to Exodus 32. Notice in verses seven and eight, how God identifies Moses with the people. After all, he did really serve as Israel's representative before God.

Exodus 32:7-10

It hadn't taken the people long to rebel and turn away from God. The people are called "stiff-necked." This is the first time they are called this in the book of Exodus. It describes a stubborn beast that refuses to be in the yoke.

God is ready to let the people have it. If you were Moses, what would your response have been? "Amen, Lord! I'm sick of these people too. I've had it with their complaining and grumbling. Have at 'em."

God is ready to destroy the Israelites. Yet there are some hints that his mercy will yet be applied. God commanded Moses to go down to the people. If he really was going to destroy them all, I don't think he would have asked Moses to get down there.

God's statement in verse 10 seems to open the door for Moses to act as Israel's mediator. Philip Graham Ryken suggests that God is asking for Moses' permission. He writes:

As the mediator, Moses stands between God and his people, and God will not proceed to punish Israel unless his prophet "allows" him to do it. Under what circumstances would God destroy Israel and start over with Moses? Only if the mediator were to stop praying for his people.

Moses responds – Exodus 32:11-14

Let's not make a mistake here and think that somehow Moses, in his persuasive arguments, got God to simply change his mind. The Scripture is very clear when it declares:

He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind. – *1 Samuel 15:29*

John Mackay writes:

It is not that God is being forced to adopt a new course of conduct because of some flawed decision of the past or because of some unforeseen circumstance having arisen. It was the LORD himself who opened up the way for the threat against his people to be removed by the appropriate action of the covenant mediator.

There is something more significant going on. What is God really after? Moses! Think back to the experience of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Who was God really after: Isaac or Abraham?

I think this is a gut-check on Moses – a leadership test. Would he be self-serving, self-centered, self-focused, in such a way as to just abandon the people whom God had charged him to lead? How wonderfully Moses rises to the challenge.

There are several things that Moses appeals to in his pleadings to God. First, he reminds God of his relationship to the people. God had said to Moses, "your people;" now Moses turns it around and says to God, "your people."

Then he appeals to God on the basis of what God has already done for his people. It was he who had brought the people out of Egypt. Then Moses speaks of God's reputation.

“What will people say of you? You are evil; you brought the people out in order to kill them.”

Finally, and probably the most significant thing – “Lord, remember your covenant. Remember the promises you made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. You are the covenant-making God. You cannot abandon those to whom you have pledged yourself.”

And so, in human language, God relents of utterly destroying Israel. With this, then, Moses proceeds down the mountain to discover what God had said he would find.

Exodus 32:15-24

Did Moses do something wrong in breaking the tablets of stone? It would appear that God did not hold this against Moses because he never punished him for this action. It was a very symbolic gesture, one probably not missed by the people. It was a picture, a symbolizing, of the people who had broken the laws of God.

Moses turns to Aaron, his older brother who had shared so much with him on this journey, and questions him about what he has done. Notice how quickly he shifts the blame: “You know the people, that they are set on evil.” It’s all their fault.

To further distance himself from any responsibility and culpability, he makes this marvelous statement: “I just threw the gold into the fire, and out came this calf! It’s a miracle!” Today, this is called “spin.” I wonder if our excuses for sin sound the same to God.

Moses, acting now as God’s representative, calls for action:

Exodus 32:25-29

There really isn’t any question of whether or not this was justified. The people had sworn a blood oath to obey God. We saw that in chapter 24. They had promised not to make any images of a god or an animal. They had sworn to worship God alone. If we fail to see that, we fail to see the utter wickedness of sin, disobedience, and rebellion.

Though God would not wipe out the entire nation of Israel, he does punish the evildoers. It is most likely that those who are killed by the Levites were those involved in continuing to carry on. The Levites were instructed to show no favoritism whether a relative or a friend. This was, in another way, a test of the Levites commitment to holiness as they would be the ones to serve in the tabernacle in the worship of God.

Now – Exodus 32:30-35

Moses goes back up the mountain, again serving in the capacity of the mediator of Israel. He doesn't offer any excuses for the people. He says, "This people has committed a great sin."

He makes an offer to God that reveals much about his character. He says, "Lord, if you will not forgive the sin of the people, then just blot me out of the book of the living." "If you are going to destroy the people, destroy me too."

Quite an offer, isn't it? I'm not sure most of us would be willing to go that far. You see, in Moses' mind, he is offering himself in place of the people. That's what he told them as he headed back up the mountain. "Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." He was hoping to be the substitute, the sacrifice, for the people, ready to die in their place.

That's Moses' offer. But God won't accept his offer! He turned Moses down. As the story is unfolding, it looks like the story is going to have a good ending. God is going to punish the people for their sin. Moses steps in as a substitute, and atonement, for the people. God will say, "Good job, Moses. And thanks." Then God forgives the people and everyone lives happily ever after.

But it wouldn't, and it didn't. The people would still need to face punishment for their sin. Why? The answer can't be found in this chapter. But when we see the whole of Scripture, we see that Moses couldn't die for the people's sin because he himself was a sinner. His death could not atone for the sins of the people; besides Moses also needed a substitute.

This is the great dilemma of man. The Bible clearly declares that we have all sinned and our lives fall short of the mark of God's glory. As a result, we are all under the just condemnation of God. Only a perfect sacrifice could ever atone for man's sin; only a perfect One could ever satisfy the justice of God.

Paul writes in Romans 3 of "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, to be received by faith."

God, in his mercy, did not utterly destroy Israel. But he did punish the evildoers by sending a plague upon them. We don't know exactly what that was, but it demonstrated God's judgment upon their sin.

In chapter 33, God turns his attention back to Moses. And we see Moses again in his role as mediator, standing in the gap before God for the people of Israel. As we wrap up this morning, let me just draw some conclusions and applications for us today.

1. God has not changed from the time of Moses. He is the Holy One of Israel. His standards have not changed; his character has not changed; his requirements have not

changed. While his judgment is so often not as immediate as it was at Sinai, we should not assume that he will withhold his punishment for sin.

2. Because of God's plan in sending his beloved Son, the perfect One, into the world to be our atoning sacrifice, we do not live in Exodus 32. That's not the lesson for us today. It's not that God has somehow changed, but that the Mediator has come, the only One in whom resides perfection, the only One whose death could atone for our sins.

This is the good news of the Gospel. Every one of us deserves punishment for our sin. Listen to Paul's description in Ephesians 2:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is not at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved... – *Ephesians 2:1-5*

Oh, the mercy and grace of God – forgiveness and eternal life possible because of our Mediator, Christ Jesus.

3. Finally, though Moses could not be The Mediator, he was God's man to intercede for the people. In the book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament, God speaks judgment against the nation of Israel, against the political rulers, against the religious leaders, against the people of Israel. He tells them, "I will pour out my wrath upon you."

Then you come to verse 30 in chapter 22, and it reads:

I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before me for the land that I should not destroy it, but I found no one.

What a tragic statement! There was found not even one who would stand in the gap. God is looking today for men and women to stand in the gap, to be intercessors, to pray like Moses.

I find it's much easier to be like the disciples of Jesus rather than Moses. Luke records an incident towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. He sends some of his disciples into a village of the Samaritans to prepare a place for him to stay. But the people of the village were not willing to receive Jesus. James and John, aptly named the "sons of thunder," said to Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven and consume them?"

When I see injustice, when I see evil in the world, when I see people flaunting their sin before God, I find myself responding more like James and John, rather than Moses. It is more common to see believers who are not living Christ-like lives and be a criticizer rather than an intercessor.

This is a lesson we can learn from Moses this morning – to be courageous, to be compassionate, to be committed to other's well-being to such an extent that we would stand in the gap and be an intercessor for others.