

Lesson 12: Exodus 25-34 Rebellion in the Camp

Introduction

The Israelites ratified covenant with God at Mt. Sinai with blood and an oath. Exodus 24:7-8 records,

⁷ Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" ⁸ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

This is the blood of oath and curse. "If we break covenant with you O God, sprinkle our blood as you have sprinkled the blood of these bulls." That is exactly what is going to happen. And it is not going to take much time for the people to rebel. We have come to the true climax of the book of Exodus. We naturally think at first the climax is the Red Sea. People usually think the critical problem is on the outside. And there often are very real problems on the outside, poverty, injustice, oppression, lack of education, bullying, dysfunctional parenting. If we could just change our life circumstances, then we could enjoy the blessing of God.

No. No. There is a deeper problem. It is one thing to get the Israelites out of Egypt. It is much harder to get Egypt out of the Israelites. We bring the problem with us in the sinful desires and sinful thoughts of our human flesh. And that sinful flesh, which we own, it is ours, that sinful flesh is conformed by patterns of sinful human society. This is the problem with every church. If you want your church to be perfect, you are going to have to leave. And we keep inviting sinners like ourselves into the community. It seems like a catch-22. How does God ever form a kingdom of priests and a holy nation out of sinful people who are determined to bring his wrath on their own heads?

The incident of the golden calf is the true climax of Exodus. There enemy within is deeper and more insidious than the enemy without. The rebellion in the camp creates a true dilemma. How does holy God carry on with this rebellious people? Before getting to that climatic dilemma, let's start with an overview of Moses' 40 days on the mountain. This is in Exodus 25-31.

Moses on the Mountain with God (Exodus 25-31)

We left the Israelites in Exodus 24 gazing up at Mt. Sinai, "And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountain top." Moses has already received the basic stipulations of covenant, the Ten Commandments, and many general stipulations of covenant. These he wrote down and read out during the ratification ceremony. On this fifth trip up the mountain, Moses will receive the pattern for a tabernacle, a mobile temple for a mobile people. God's intent is to dwell in a special way with the Israelites.

God desires for heart worship from the Israelites (25:1-2).

Chapter 25 starts out this way in verses 1-2.

¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise My contribution.

To build the tabernacle pattern given by God, Moses is going to require much wealth from the plunder the Israelites brought out from Egypt, precious metals, gems, cloth and wood. God does not demand these goods as his portion of the plunder, though that would certainly be fair. Instead, he tells Moses to raise it "from every man whose heart moves him." I know that these are just a few words in a much larger text, but it is a foreshadow of the teaching to come. Deuteronomy is going to be very concerned with the heart obedience of the Israelites. So, while on one hand the covenant must operate as a strict legal code to provide order and to minimize the effects of sin and corruption that occur in any human society, the covenant also operates on the hearts of the ones who believe to draw them into a deeper walk with God. He desires a heart response from the Israelites. More on that in Deuteronomy.

God intends to dwell with his people (29:45-46).

With all the detail for the building of the tabernacle and its furnishings and the priestly garments, we might miss the central point of this section. God intends to provide the Israelites a real sense of his presence among them. He said in 29:45-46,

⁴⁵ I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. ⁴⁶ They shall know that I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God.”

This is why we emphasize palace or temple as one of the six elements in our kingdom motif. It is a theological theme from Genesis all the way to Revelation. Adam and Eve experienced the presence of God in the garden. There was a tree of life and a river running through it. Revelation 21-22 give us a similar vision, though in a city, the new Jerusalem, rather than in a garden. There is there also a tree of life and a river running through it and the presence of God among his people. That is the future vision of a new heaven and new earth. For now, God plans to make his presence felt in the tabernacle which establishes some boundaries. God’s glory will be revealed only in part and is only approachable to a certain point. Just as Moses walked on holy ground at the burning bush and just as the Israelites stayed off the mountain when God appeared in fire and smoke, so also there is a barrier in the tabernacle to remind the Israelites of the holiness of God.

God desires heart worship. He desires personal relationship. He says, “I will dwell among them and I will be their God.” That does not mean he is the Israelites’ God as opposed to being other peoples’ God. Yahweh is Lord of all. But when we say, “You are my God!”, we are expressing personal commitment to the Lord. This personal commitment includes personal relationship. If we are not sure how personal that could have been for Old Covenant believers, the Psalms give us a glimpse into how some of them experienced relationship with Yahweh. They felt free to pour out every kind of positive and negative emotion that we can think of. There is an intimacy of relationship there that many New Covenant believers have never experienced. And yet, God does keep a boundary around his holiness that will not be removed by the ongoing symbolic sacrifices of atonement required in the Mosaic Covenant. God will not remove the barrier to the Holy of Holies until after the one true sacrifice of atonement has been made by Jesus, much in the future, on the cross.

So, in the tabernacle, we have something amazing and beautiful and personal, yet, still communicating that there is a barrier between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of his people.

If you can imagine the beauty of the finished product and even more the experience of the presence of God dwelling in the finished product, then the reading about the tabernacle pattern takes on a sense of excitement. So, imagine preparing a stage production or a wedding celebration or Christmas decorations. And if you are a creative type that may come easier to you. I believe Moses was able to envision the rich fabrics and precious metals, all the colors of gold, scarlet, and blue, to be fashioned by skilled artisans. Imagine the glorious presence of God in the tabernacle, casting light out through the fabric. It must have been glorious in the colors, like rainbow light. And there is this fresh smell of bread every day on the table of presence and the continual release of aromatic incense. All the senses are engaged. Exodus 28:2 instructs to make garments for the priests, “for glory and for beauty.” The dressing of the priests is to reflect the one they serve who is full of glory and beauty.

On the mountain top Moses experiences this grand vision of God dwelling among a people who have received him as their own. In his arms Moses holds “the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God (31:18).” But before he goes down, God warns him that he is not going to like what he finds at his return. Moses’ experience with God on the mountain is very different from the people’s experience in the camp.

Israel's Covenant Unfaithfulness: The Breaking of the Covenant (Exodus 32:1-6)

Exodus 32:1-6:

¹ 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." ² 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." ³ Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron. ⁴ 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." ⁵ 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." ⁶ 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.

As Moses experiences the beauty and goodness and truth of God in the plans he has for this people, the Israelites in their impatience and faithlessness degrade God into a form designed by the minds of men. They had experienced first-hand the otherness of God, the mystery and holiness of God. He told them that he intentionally revealed the fearfulness of his might, so that they would not sin. And yet, the pull of Egypt in their sinful flesh overcame their experience with God, overcame their oath to obey all that he has commanded. So, they fashioned an idol and called it Yahweh.

One thing that stands out to me here is how strongly our conception of God is molded by our social upbringing. The people had grown up in a culture full of idols. Every people group around them understood the gods to dwell in the physical forms of statues made in the shapes of people and animals. We do not have a record of how faithful the Jews were or were not in their worship of Yahweh while in Egypt. We do have reason to doubt. In Leviticus 17, Moses is going to have to address again the problem of idolatry again. Joshua gives us some insight into the Egypt experience when he expresses his doubts about the faithfulness of the second generation. After the conquest of the land, he will say this as part of his final charge, this is Joshua 24:14-16,

¹⁴ "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

He says that your fathers served the gods beyond the River and the gods in Egypt. The gods beyond the River are the gods of Mesopotamia. Whenever the Old Covenant just mentions the River without much context it means the Euphrates river. And apparently, Abraham's family served Mesopotamian gods before Abraham responded to the call of Yahweh. But then Joshua also indicates that during their 400 years in Egypt, the fathers had been unfaithful, worshiping gods in Egypt. Now he is afraid they are going to do the same in Canaan. Wherever they go, they end up worshiping the gods prominent in that present society. It was the logic of the times. You can have your far-off creator God, Yahweh. No problem. But to worship him truly, for him to be your God and dwell among you as a people, to experience the power of his blessing in life and war, he must be with you as an idol. That is simply the way religion works. To do it any other way is ridiculous. You are not going to get results. And on top of that, you are going to need more gods than one. The Creator God is too busy with big things to care about whether you have a child or whether your crops do well or whether your shop succeeds or whether you overcome your personal enemy. There are other gods for that, other ways to get pregnant, to bring rain, to be financially successful, to get back at those who deserve it. Pleasure, control, security, identity, the gods can give you these things.

It is hard in our day to connect with the emotional and intellectual pull that the idol had on Israel. And yet, we have our own concept of what makes worship right and true. Last week I went into an

Orthodox church in Serbia. Men and women came in and bowed to the icons, the images of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints. There was a strong, pleasant smell of incense. And there was no seating. It was quite foreign to me. There was only this open area before the screen behind which the priests conduct the services. I think it was the closest to Old Testament worship, I have experienced. I can imagine an Orthodox person entering a simple, Protestant church. I don't think they would know what to do. The worship would feel strange, it would feel off, incorrect.

This feeling also exists among Protestants. In some sense you have had this feeling. You have gone into a place where it doesn't seem like people can be worshipping here. It's off. How do you worship from the heart to slow organ music? Or how do you truly worship without organ music and theologically rich hymns? How can you worship when there is a band on stage? How can you worship without a band on stage? How can you worship without moving, you are just standing, just sitting? Well, how can you worship with all the distraction of movement, all the hand raising and clapping and everybody doing something different? When we grow up in a religious community, we develop a feel for true worship. And it is developed out of our experiences. The Israelites had a feel for right worship. And it required an idol.

But this isn't just about worship. It is about how you go about living life. What gives you identity, what gives you power, what gives you security, what gives you pleasure. When you seek for these things outside of the will of God, outside the context that God has created, whatever gives you those things, identity, power, security, pleasure, whether a job, a career, a relationship, when you follow the present wisdom of your culture ("God's not concerned with these things for me. I've got to achieve them myself. There has got to be some other, something else that will give me identity, something that will give me control over my future, something that will bring me pleasure."), when you seek that outside of relationship with God, you have slipped into idolatry. You are seeking something from the creation, either in a way that was never intended, or you are seeking for it apart from finding it in God. You are meant to receive it from God. There is powerful pressure on our human flesh from society to conform to its norms, its reasoning, its patterns.

So, less than forty days after making the oath, "We will do all the LORD has commanded," the people gang up on Aaron and demand that he make gods that will lead them up to the promise land. Sadly, Aaron gives in. God had planned for Moses to collect a free will offering for the tabernacle. Instead, Aaron collects a free will offering of gold and makes a golden calf.

There is a little bit of confusion in the text as to whether the people want gods or a god. So, it depends on your Bible translation which one you get. The word Elohim is the word translated as God in the Old Covenant, but as indicated by the "im" ending in Elohim, it is a plural noun. So, it also means gods. Translators usually tell the difference by whether the verb is plural or singular. If the verb is singular, we are talking about God, and if the verb is plural, we are talking about gods. Here in verse 4 the people urge Aaron to "make us Elohim" which could be make us God or makes us gods. But then, in the phrase "who brought us up from the land of Egypt", the verb "brought" is plural. So, we would could understand the people as asking for gods who brought us up from Egypt. But then, Aaron makes one gold calf and tells the people in verse 5 that they would have a feast to Yahweh before the idol. So, I think probably the people are asking for an idol of Yahweh but along with that a host of gods. The king of kings, the main god, the creator god is surrounded by other gods. So, they are both asking for an idol of Yahweh and the gods that go with him.

The Israelites have likely broken the first three commands all at once here. The first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me." This means you shall have God only as your god. It also means you shall not have a pantheon. All the other peoples had a pantheon of gods with one god who ruled, and the rest gathered before that god. That is the language there, "no other gods before me." The Israelites are not rejecting Yahweh in their minds when they ask for gods or when they ask for the idol. They could set Yahweh up in the center and ask for gods around him. So, they are breaking the first command.

The second commandment is, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.” This commandment rejects the idea of making a whole host of idols, and also rejects the idea of fashioning an idol and calling it Yahweh. Again, the Israelites might have rationalized that we are not rejecting Yahweh, “We are giving him an appropriate form.” This is “good worship.” They are molding him into their cultural image of what a god should be.

God rejects any attempt to represent him by something he has created. And he rejects the human desire to make him into an acceptable god. When we reject or downplay the biblical characteristics or stories that we find distasteful or we find uncomfortable or too hard or mysterious to explain, we are molding God into a more acceptable, culturally defined image. A God of tolerance for all behavior or a God who would never express wrath or a God who accepts worship in any form as long as it is sincere, those are all culturally acceptable forms of Christianity. If that is your Christianity, you are going to fit in. But that rejects the clear revelation that God has given in Scripture concerning himself. You might not understand the trinity. You might not understand the incarnation, Jesus as man and God. But it is not given to us to create the nature of God. Again, as I have said, he is not a result of our imagination. We are a result of his imagination. We came to be out of his mind, not the other way around. So, we may not mold a calf and call it God, but we often mold God into our own understanding of what he must be like.

The third commandment is, “You shall not take the name of your LORD God in vain.” We often think this means “do not cuss using God’s name.” And that is inappropriate. We should not cuss using God’s name, but that is not what this is about. This is about prayer. This is about using the name of God to get what we want. The ancient peoples sought to manipulate their gods for their own benefit. They had an uneasy business relationship with the gods through which they sought blessing for themselves and cursing against their enemies. They thought, “All we have to do is find the right formula for pleasing God. And it might change, so we need to keep adjusting.” They knew they needed God to win their battles. And the right way to do that is to have an idol up front and God leading them. And the idol would go before them. And they would call on God as though he is a power source that they can manipulate somehow for their own benefit. That is taking the name of God in vain. When we pray in the name of Jesus, thinking that somehow gives us power or control, then we are using magic to manipulate the Creator of the universe. Prayer is a request. Prayer is a relationship. Prayer is a trusting of God where we offer up, but we accept his answer no matter what. We do not manipulate or control him. The Israelites have made Yahweh into a form that they think they can manipulate into winning their battles for them. Instead of trusting in faith that God goes before them, they will physically carry God before them as a source of power.

In calling for the molding of an idol, the people have rejected God’s own revelation of himself, choosing instead to go with a culturally defined revelation of what a truly powerful and honorable god should look like. This is a god everybody can get behind, a god for the whole society, a god that can be manipulated for blessing and power, which means, in fact, this is no longer God.

Most of the rest of chapter 32 and 33 record interactions between God and Moses concerning the sinful treachery of the people. We will start with God’s initial judgment and this comes in verses 7-10.

Resolution of Israel’s Covenant Unfaithfulness (Exodus 32:7-34:7)

God’s Decrees Initial Judgment (32:7-10)

⁷ 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*.⁸ 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!’ ”⁹ The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people.¹⁰ 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.”

This is the just judgment of the great king who is also holy God. The people have rejected his self-revelation, breaking the first three basic commandments of the covenant. They do not have the excuse of misunderstanding. God revealed himself in fire and smoke, speaking out the commandments himself. The law was clear. They promised to obey it on an oath of blood. And they have clearly broken it. They have neither feared his holiness nor shown gratitude for his gracious redemption.

Verse 10 connects together the story of the burning bush and the story of Mount Sinai with this phrase, "Let me alone, that my anger may burn against them." The holiness of God burned on the bush, and God burned on the mountain. At the burning bush God's anger burned against Moses the fourth time he refused God's command. Now God's anger burns against the Israelites.

Moses Mediates for the People (32:11-14)

After hearing this judgment, Moses responds to God as a mediator, making intercession for the people. This is verses 11-14.

¹¹ Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil *intent* He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about *doing* harm to Your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit *it* forever.' " ¹⁴ So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

Notice how Moses intercedes. He does not plead on the basis of the people's goodness. "They are basically good, God. Forgive them." He does not make excuses to lessen the seriousness of their crimes. He does not make promises to God about future behavior or ritual or how they could pay God back. Moses basis his intercession on the glory of God. He does not want the Egyptians to have something about which to speak ill of God. Moses also basis his plea on the promises that God made to Abraham. It is intercession based on the glory of God and on the word of God.

Then we have this incredible statement, "So, the Lord changed his mind" about what he said he would do. The Lord changed his mind. How does the one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever change his mind? Is that what prayer is, making good enough of an argument to convince God that he is wrong? Did Moses out argue God? No. There is something else going on here.

And this is what I think is going on. This is an example of how God draws a person into experience with him in order to change the person. This is one of the main functions of prayer. We pray in order to see things the way God sees things. We lift up our requests, and we put them before God, so that lifting our eyes to him, we might see as he sees and be changed. There is similarity in God's command to Abraham that he sacrifice Isaac. God, at that moment, drew Abraham up into his heart to experience the sacrifice that one day would be made by God's son. Abraham had this experience of the character and the mind and the heart of God. I believe God is drawing Moses up into the tension of his own heart here.

God is both just and loving, which leads to both wrath and compassion. God cannot simply ignore justice out of compassion, or he would then cease to be holy and good. On the other hand, if God's compassion cannot be expressed, there is no way forward for relationship with sinful people. We cannot understand the cross without understanding the seriousness of God's justice and the greatness of his love. In this interaction with Moses, God draws him up into that tension. First, God draws out a response of compassion by letting Moses feel the full heat of his anger. The Son of God himself will be the true mediator between man and God. Moses is being given an opportunity, in a sense, to step into that role.

So, what does it mean to say that God changed his mind? I think it works as an intentional, but unspoken conditional. I think God said to himself, "I will destroy this people unless Moses steps up and intercedes for them, upon which case I will not destroy this people. And I know Moses will step up to intercede, so, I know I will not destroy this people." God's intent was for Moses to act without being commanded to act. He wanted Moses to choose to intercede. So, he only spoke to Moses the first part of the conditional, "I will destroy this people." He left the rest unspoken, so that in that space, Moses could choose whether to step forward in compassion or not. And so, according to the verbal interaction between God and Moses, it is fair to say that God changed his mind. And yet, if we are making a comment about the sovereign will of God or the nature of God, then no, in that sense the outcome was exactly what God had planned in the first place. Moses did not convince him to change his will or his purpose.

I have a personal example that helps me to connect what I am saying with how God might express part of his will, but not the whole, in order to create a space that a person might be willing to step into. My example comes from a way I have sometimes communicated as a parent. Generally, when I announced consequences for my kids, I carried through, consistency being king in disciplining children. But there were occasions where I announced consequences that were conditional, but I did not tell my kids because I wanted my kids to choose to do what was right without me telling them to. So, for example, "I asked you to clean your room three hours ago. It is a complete mess. I know that I said we would go to the park at 11:30, it is now 11:15, so, we are not going to the park today, because you did not follow through with what I asked you to do." That may be what I said aloud, while I added to myself, "But if I see contrition and the room gets cleaned in 15 minutes, I will give in and we will go to the park." In this case, I chose to not say that last part out loud because I wanted to see that decision being made by my child on her own. I want to see her take responsibility herself. So, if she comes back in 15 minutes and says, "Dad, I am sorry I did not clean my room this morning like I was supposed to. Its all clean now. Would it be possible for us to still go?" Then if I said, "Sure. Get your coat on." It would appear that I had changed my mind. It would even be fair to say I had changed my mind. But it would also be fair to say that I was acting according to my original plan. I simply did not speak my whole plan in order to hopefully bring about a change in my child's heart.

I have heard that the greatest chess masters can plan 26 moves in advance. I don't know if that is true. Its hard for me to imagine. But I am sure God can see ahead infinitely further. He knows what he is doing. And here he has created an opportunity for Moses to step into, so that Moses himself will feel the compassionate heart, will experience what it is to intercede. After God relents against destroying Israel, Moses heads down the Mountain to confront the people himself. This is in verses 15-20.

Moses' Anger Burns Against the Israelites (32:15-20)

¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one *side* and the other. ¹⁶ The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a sound of war in the camp." ¹⁸ But he said, "It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; But the sound of singing I hear." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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*.

The anger of God turned Moses to compassion, now faced with the sin of the people, Moses feels the burning anger of God. This is that tension between just wrath and compassionate love. We could wish that this would be the end of the punishment, that the people would repent. But they do not. First, Moses confronts Aaron. Aaron blames the people and then gives this excuse for the idol in 32:24, "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." Then Moses confronted the people, taking his stand in the

gate of the camp and crying out, "Whoever is for the Yahweh come to me." Sadly, only the tribe of Levi came to stand with Moses. Levi fought against or executed, the text is not clear, 3000 Israelites that day. The wrath of God is both a just punishment and also a tool to turn the people away from their wickedness and back to what is good and beautiful and true, back to God. They would not turn when given a chance to repent. They do turn when Moses and the Levites begin to carry out the just sentence for breaking the covenant oath.

Moses Again Mediates for the People (32:30-32)

After ending the worship of the golden idol and bringing the people back in line, Moses ascends one more time on the mountain to meet with God, this is his sixth time up. He is going to meet with God again as the mediator of the people. This is 32:30-32.

³⁰ 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." ³¹ 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. ³² But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"

That is the heart. Moses can not do that. Jesus will do that. But Moses is beginning to experience what it is to truly stand in the gap for the people to be their mediator and to intercede for them.

God Restores the Covenant (33-34)

The Lord then told Moses to depart with the people from Sinai and go up to the land of Canaan. But there will now be a change in the plan. God will no longer dwell among his people. This is 33:3-5.

³ "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way." ⁴ When the people heard this sad word, they went into mourning, and none of them put on his ornaments. ⁵ For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I shall do with you.'"



We have finally come to the point of the burning bush. I said in the lesson chapter 3 that the burning bush is the symbol of the whole story. And this is it. God cannot go up with Israel. He is a holy God. And they are a combustible people. His burning anger will light them up, for they will continue to sin. And this is the great problem of the covenant. It was the problem with the promise. Abraham could not be steadily faithful. Isaac could not be steadily faithful. Jacob certainly could not keep faithful. And even the best of them, Joseph, had his faults. It is the

problem with this new mosaic covenant. The Israelites cannot keep it. Moses marveled back in chapter 3 that the bush was not burned up. It is not the marvel that the bush has not burned up. It is the marvel that Israel has not yet been burned up. Israel is the bush. God is the fire. And if we do not marvel at the fact that the Lord does not burn us up, each one of us, then we have not yet come to a true understanding of our own sin. It should be a mystery. How does God put up with me? And yet, he does. How does holy God ever make lasting covenant with any group of men and women? That is the symbol of the burning bush. The fire remains on the bush, and yet, the bush is not consumed.

God has not given the answer to that problem, yet. He simply states the problem, and he gives up the plan to dwell with the people. That is one solution. God just will not go with them, so he will not burn them up. He is prodding Moses again, to make him face the problem. And Moses sees the problem. He says this in 33:15-16.

¹⁵ ..."If Your presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here. ¹⁶ For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the *other* people who are upon the face of the earth?"

This is the problem. They are supposed to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests to the peoples of the world. “But how can we be who you have called us to be if you are not present with us? We can’t be a special nation. It is your presence that makes us special. And this should be the cry of every local church, every Christian movement. Jesus have given us a new command, “that you love one another, and they will know you by your love.” Do any of us seriously think we can do that without God dwelling in our midst. It is the love of Christ through us that people experience. If we do not have a sense of the presence of the Lord among us, then what is the point of our existence. How can we be any different, how will we be distinguished from every other religious group of people, if God’s power and goodness and transforming presence is not among us?

Moses is right. This is the request God wanted Moses to make when he said, “I will not go up with you.” So, God responds in the next verse, “I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name.” But now Moses has come back to the first problem. He has asked for fire to come into the camp. He has invited holy God among a flammable people. So, how will they not be consumed by his just wrath when they sin? “We can’t do this without you. We can’t do this with you.”

And so, Moses then makes this request, “I pray, show me Your glory!” Moses wants to see how this is going to work. Who are you that you can dwell among a sinful people without burning them up and still remaining just and holy? Show me who you are! Show me your glory!

The Lord tells Moses, “You cannot see the full glory of God and live. You are only catch a glimpse of my glory. Instead, I will my glory to you.” And he speaks to Moses the glory of his name. His name is in his character, the glory of his being. So, God hides Moses in the rock and then declares his name to him in Exodus 34:6-7.

⁶ Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷ who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”

This is the second key verse to memorize for Exodus. Exodus is very much about knowing God, according to how God has revealed himself. In chapter 3 Moses first asked the wrong question, “Who am I?” before he asked the right question, “Who are you?” Pharaoh acknowledged, “I do not know Yahweh.” And despite confirmation after confirmation in the plagues, he never sought to know Yahweh. God declared his intention to make himself known through the plagues, and so he did, to the Israelites, to the Egyptians, even to peoples further afield like Jethro in Midian and Rahab in Canaan. He made himself known to anyone who would receive that knowledge, who would receive him. And here again God makes himself known through the declaration of his name. And we see in it the tension of a truly good character, the tension between love and justice.

The second part of the name teaches us that in his compassion God continues to be holy and just. In verse 7 we are told, “yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” The grace of God does not remove the consequences brought on us and on our children as a result of our sin. God does not explain here why the sin is visited on fathers and their children and their grandchildren. We will learn how that works as we continue on in the Pentateuch. God will not allow in his law punishment on children because of the sin of a parent. Each man, each woman, must pay the penalty for their own transgressions. I believe here we have a recognition of the consequence of sin. God will allow sin to have its effects. When parents turn from God, that turning away will have an effect on the children. They will be wounded. They will be molded. They will take on aspects of the worldview of their parents. There will be a spiritual effect for which the parents are responsible. And that effect will eventually lead to sin in the children. And then the children will responsible, accountable for their own sin. And if they continue to live apart from God, their lifestyle will then have an effect on their children.

It is not generational sin in the sense that children and grandchildren are punished for the sin of their parents. It is a recognition that parents have a significant spiritual influence on the direction their children will take. Sin brings consequences, not only for ourselves, but also on those for whom we have been given real responsibility.

And while God's justice will allow the effects of sin down to the third and fourth generation, we are also supposed to notice the greater abundance of God's compassion and grace, for he is the one "who keeps lovingkindness for thousands!"

What kind of holy God can live in the midst of sinful man? "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin..." The answer to the question posed by the burning bush is found here in the name of God and along with the truth symbolized by the Passover Lamb. There is the character of God and his atoning act. Because of his love and because of his grace and because of his compassion and because of his truth, God will find a way for love and justice to come together. God will find a way to atone for the sin of the people.

There is just one last thing I want to show you. Through the Old Testament, this name of God gave hope to the Psalmists and the prophets. After his great sin, David asks for forgiveness in Psalm 51, basing his request in the name of God revealed here in Exodus 34. He prayed, "Be **gracious** to me, O God, according to your **lovingkindness**; according to the greatness of your **compassion** blot out my transgressions (51:1)." Ironically, Jonah also prays the name of God, but he does so to tell God that this is exactly why he did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place. Jonah wanted vengeance on the merciless Assyrians, the superpower of the North. He told God in Jonah 4:2, that he knew this would happen, that they would repent and God would forgive, "for I knew that you are **a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness**, and one who relents concerning calamity." For other prophets the name of God always gives space for hope. No matter how much judgement the prophets foresaw against the sin of the people, they also always saw the hope of restoration. That is because they knew their God. As Joel says in 2:13, "Rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the LORD your God, for **He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness** and relenting of evil."

Do you know that for yourself, that you can always return to the Lord your God because he is the Lord your God compassionate with you, gracious to you, slow to anger, and abounding in his lovingkindness and truth?

Conclusion

Israel thought that the greater enemy existed outside the community. "If only we can throw off the Egyptians, we will be free." We see how untrue this is. A more insidious enemy resides within. In the emotion of the moment on Mt. Sinai, they shouted out, "We will obey all these commandments!" And yet, the disobedience came quickly and with equal enthusiasm. So, God's anger burned, like flame on the bush and fire on the mountain. Yet, the people were not consumed.

Just as we saw in Genesis, the promise of God is anchored in the character of God. Only God can bring about relationship and restore kingdom. God is committed to this sinful people. Out of his great compassion he has made a way to dwell with them without transgressing his own justice. He will be the Passover Lamb. So, he tells Moses, "Cut out two new tablets of stone, because I am going to restore covenant and dwell among my people."

Reflection Questions

1. What words would you use to guess at some different emotions Moses experienced on the mountain receiving the tabernacle pattern? He is not to the hard work yet of building the tabernacle but rather in the envisioning stage where God is forming a vision in his mind of what it is going to be like? How do you imagine his experience?
2. Observe Exodus 32:1-6. What stands out to you as interesting, strange, important, or confusing concerning in these verses?
3. The first command from God in Exodus 25 was for Moses to raise an offering of the heart by the people to build a tabernacle. And then in Exodus 32, we hear that Aaron raised a free will offering to fulfill the demand that he make a golden idol to represent the one who brought the people out of Egypt. How does the experience of Moses on the mountain underscore or emphasize the behavior of the people in the camp?
4. Now observe Exodus 32:7-35. What stands out to you in these verses?
5. What are some different ways that Moses executes the role of a mediator in 32:7-35?
6. Considering Exodus 33:3-6 and 12-16, does the burning bush as a symbol of Exodus make sense to you? What is the main problem of the book? What is the surprise declaration of the burning bush? How can that be?
7. Moses asks to see God's glory, and God declares his glory to Moses in 34:6-7. What are some things that stand out to you when you read the name of God in these verses?
8. Take a few moments to pray to God, praying his Word back to him, praising him according to his name in Exodus 34:6-7 and according to his name in Exodus 3:14.