

Growing up my family was not very religious. We never went to church-not even on Easter or at Christmas. We didn't have a bible in the house, we never talked about God, we didn't pray at mealtime, we didn't watch the ten commandments movie. We didn't do any of those sort of things. I really didn't know anything about God. When I was away at college I met some fellow students who were Christians. They talked about God, prayer, reading the Bible, and going to church. It made me curious to know more, so I did what anybody would do, I got a bible and started reading. If I remember correctly, I think I got through Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, and then quit reading after starting the book of Numbers. But I still remember reading Exodus. I was amazed as I read about the plagues, the passover, and the parting of the Red Sea. I remember thinking - huh, so this is God. I couldn't believe how powerful God was.

So I was really excited when I heard we were studying Exodus this year. I had been dealing with some really hard things last year and thought, this is what I need. I need to be studying, soaking in, and hearing about how powerful God is. When the email went out looking for speakers, I responded right away. I felt it would really help me to have that motivation of teaching to study a passage, to do the homework each week, and to pay attention to each speaker. I needed, I longed, to hear about the power of God to help me as I walked through those hard things. But instead, I got a chapter about idols, and sin, and blame shifting, and consequences of sin. Where's the power of God that I need?

Today we are in Chapter 32 of Exodus. It may be a familiar story to many people - this chapter covers the incident of the Golden Calf. We will look at 4 things in this chapter:

- 1 - the breaking of the covenant vs 1-6
- 2 - the intercession of Moses vs 7-14
- 3 - confronting sin vs 15-24
- 4 - the consequences of sin vs 25-35

Let's refresh our memories about the events leading up to Chapter 32.

In Chapter 20 God spoke to Israel from the mountain giving them the 10 commandments. The people were afraid and told Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." So Moses went back to the mountain and God gave him the book of the covenant. In Chapter 24 the people confirmed the covenant by saying, "all the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." Moses again went back up to the mountain to receive further instructions from the Lord. In chapter 24 we read that Moses entered the cloud (on Mount Sinai) for 40 days and 40 nights. Chapters 24 -31 contain the instructions for the building of the tabernacle and all its contents. The place where God would dwell with His people. This is where we start Chapter 32.

Verses 1- 6 in chapter 32 read:

*When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" 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." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play."*

Just a few chapters ago in Chapter 24 verse 3 we read, "Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules" This included the 10 commandments and all the other rules and laws we looked at in Chapters 20 - 24. Verse 3 continues "And all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.'" How did things change so quickly? They break not one, but two of the ten commandments. #1). You shall have no other Gods before me and #2). 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. They have broken the covenant they just a few chapters earlier said they would obey. But they did more than just break the first two commandments. They turned away from God and made themselves new gods. They have Aaron make a new god for them and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!". Then they build an altar and worship it. Again, how did this happen so fast? How did they go from, we will do everything the Lord has said, to worshipping a manmade golden calf?

Two things that stood out to me as contributing to Israel's sin was the wilderness and waiting.

First, the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 8 verse 15 Moses describes the wilderness this way, "the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water." What happened to the promised land flowing with milk and honey. But God took them through the wilderness on the way to the promised land. Here are some of Israel's statements about the wilderness:

"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in

bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt; 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

"Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

"Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

Some of their statements are pretty dramatic. They are clearly struggling with their journey in the wilderness. Admittedly the wilderness is a hard and scary place. Resources are scarce. They've likely used up all the food they brought with them when they left Egypt. They ran out of water. They didn't know what was ahead for them, where they were going, or what the path would look like. It was all new and unknown. But it doesn't seem like they really have an accurate memory of what Egypt was like. They were slaves, suffering under great oppression. Was life really as good as they were remembering? Was it really better than where they were now? Hard circumstances can really warp our sense of perception of reality, can't they? Each time they grumbled about something, God responded. He responded by providing for them - manna, quail, water from a rock. He responded by being patient with them, and demonstrating His love for them. Yet they still struggled to trust God.

The second contributor - waiting. They had been waiting for 40 days for Moses to return from meeting with God on Mount Sinai. They say to Aaron, "we do not know what has become of Moses." Waiting seems to put them over the edge. Their faith seems to disappear. They decide not to wait any longer and want to create their own gods. Just for a little perspective, in verse 8 God says,

“They [Israel] have turned aside QUICKLY out of the way that I commanded them.”

Who among us likes to wait? Not me, that’s for sure. Waiting for God to answer prayer, waiting for the wilderness to be over, waiting for God to change that difficult person in our life, waiting for test results, waiting to have children. The list could go on and on. Especially in our society today, we do not like to wait. We want everything instantly. Just a few years ago the most popular new kitchen appliance was — the Instapot. We don’t even like to wait for our food to cook. A popular delivery service today - Instacart. Who needs to waste time waiting in line at the store.

None of us likes to wait. And Israel isn’t only waiting, they are waiting in the wilderness. Waiting on its own is hard, but waiting in the wilderness is even harder. I’ve gone through a few wildernesses in my life. I’m sure many of you have too. It’s really hard to keep trusting God as you wait in the wilderness. As Israel waits for Moses, they stop trusting God. Maybe they feared Moses wasn’t coming back, that something happened to him. So what do they do? They decide to take matters into their own hands. (I never do that, do you ever do that?). They decide to make a replacement for God. They tell Aaron, “make us gods who shall go before us.” That’s what idolatry is all about - substituting something else for God. Putting something else in God’s place. Here it’s a golden calf. It’s a physical, tangible replacement God. It’s so obviously wrong. It’s appalling to us. How can they not see that. We would never do that. No, we wouldn’t make a golden calf. We’re more subtle about our idols. We replace God with things like, people, money, careers, status, power, the reputation of being a good women’s bible study teacher. At the heart level it’s the same thing. We’ve stopped trusting God to provide for our needs - whatever those needs might be, and we look to other things to provide instead. Sometimes, even things of our own making. If you don’t think you do this, or you’re not sure how you do this - ask God to show you. He will.

The saddest part of this story is, Moses is up on the mountain getting instructions from God for building the tabernacle. The place where God's presence would dwell among His people. If they would have been able to trust God and kept waiting, God would have fulfilled His good plans for them. The other sad part, the gold that was used to create the calf was gold God provided to Israel from the Egyptians as they were fleeing Egypt. It was supposed to be used in the building of the tabernacle. What a slap in the face to God.

The final verses in this section talk about how Israel worshipped the golden calf. Aaron built an altar before it, the people made burnt and peace offerings to it, and then they partied. The wording in the text suggests the partying had sexual overtones. This was not the way God said he was to be worshipped. One commentator said the following, "Israel wanted to worship in their own style, with their own priest, their own altar, their own scarifies, their own god, and their own do-it-yourself salvation. Rather than worshipping God the way He pleased, they did it the way they pleased." Things haven't really changed much since then have they.

The covenant is broken and now we will look at what that means for Israel.

Let's continue with verses 7-14:

*And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down for your people, whom you brought out of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!'" And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against*

*them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."*

*But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'with evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of the heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the LORD relented from the disaster that He had spoken of bringing on his people.*

God tells Moses what is going on in the camp and tells him to get back down there. He tells Moses how the people have replaced him with a golden calf, that they have worshipped it, and made sacrifices to it. He goes on to tell Moses to leave him alone so his wrath may burn hot against the people and he can consume them. He tells Moses He will make a great nation out of him instead. Maybe this sounds like a bit of a harsh reaction to us. But, since Israel broke the covenant, God is no longer bound by it.

If I were Moses, I probably would have said something like — I know, those people are the worst. They just complain all the time and act like Egypt was the best place ever and I've brought them out here to torture them and make their lives miserable. Yes, let's start over and use my offspring this time. But that's not what Moses does. Instead he argues on behalf of the people. He doesn't defend them, or deny their actions. He makes his arguments not based on the worthiness or deservedness of Israel, but solely on God's promises and character. He starts by saying, "your people" reminding God that he chose Israel. He

continues with, how would it look to the Egyptians if you killed the Israelites? What about your covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel?

The section concludes with vs 14 - "And the LORD relented from the disaster that He had spoken of bringing on his people. This verse has lead to some confusion and questions. Does this mean God changes His mind? He was going to kill them, but then changed his mind? 1 Samuel 15:29 says, "for he [God] is not a man, that he should change his mind". So it can't be that. Philip Ryker in his commentary on Exodus explained it this way:

"It was never God's purpose to destroy the Israelites, but only to save them. If he really intended to destroy them, then why send Moses down at all? The answer is that He was planning to save them through the intercession of their mediator (Moses)" God was sending Moses to pray for their forgiveness." In the end, God did what he had intended to do from the beginning. He answered the prayer of the mediator whom he had appointed by saving the people he had chosen from all eternity."

All of this was to paint a picture for us and help us today to understand that we also need a mediator. Jesus came down to intercede for us and turn away God's wrath. Rom 8:34 says, "Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Like Moses, Jesus doesn't plead for us on the basis of our righteousness, but on the basis of His own.

Let's continue with verses 15 - 24

*"Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." But he said, "it is not the sound of shouting for*

*victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, But the sound of singing that I hear." And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.*

*And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, 'Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off. So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.'"*

When Moses gets back to camp and sees what is going on for himself, he now burns with anger. He destroys the two stone tablets he was carrying, along with the golden calf. He realizes the gravity of what has happened. The people have broken the covenant with God, and also he sees that they are out of control. One commentator noted, "The original covenant with the Lord was shattered in the same place it had been made, at the foot of the mountain." Moses also completely destroys the golden calf. He melts it down, grounds it into powder, scatters it on the water and makes the people drink it. That gold will not be reused for anything else.

Moses then turns his attention to Aaron. He asks what the people did to him to make him do this? He says, "you have brought such a great sin upon them" What they did was a great sin. So, what does Aaron do - he side steps and blame shifts. First he tells Moses to calm down - asking why he is so angry. Then he blames it on the people - they are set on evil. Next, he says he threw the gold in the fire and out popped this calf. God told

Moses what happened and how it happened. Aaron isn't fooling anyone.

Just like worshipping the gold calf, the blame shifting and excuses from Aaron seem so obviously wrong. How can he even say the words - it just popped out of the fire like this. We're not really told here whether anything more was said to Aaron or whether he ever came clean and confessed his sin. In verse 30 we are told that Moses went up to the Lord to pray for the people, Aaron included. In Deut 9:20 it says, "And the Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him. And I (Moses) prayed for Aaron also at that same time. God didn't destroy Aaron. In fact, he went on to be the high priest.

Verses 25 -35:

*"And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose to the derision of their enemies) then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day."*

*The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people have sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin- but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."*

*But the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."*

*Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made."*

Moses has destroyed the tablets, destroyed the idol, and made the people drink water containing the gold from the idol. Yet, at this point some of the people are still out of control. So Moses stands at the gate of the camp and calls the people to repent - "who is on the Lord's side? Come to me". Verse 26 says "All the sons of Levi gathered around him." Moses then tells the Levites to go through the camp and kill everyone who has not repented. But this command comes from the Lord, not Moses. About three thousand men were killed that day. That is actually a very small percentage of the total number of Israelites. The Levites were then commended for the action they had to take against their brother, friend, and neighbor. This killing was to restore order to the camp and stamp out the final remnants of the golden calf idol worship.

In the last few verses of the chapter, we see Moses going back to the Lord to once again intercede for the people. He acknowledges that the people have "sinned a great sin." This time he offers himself up as the sacrifice for the people's sin - "But now, if you will forgive their sin- but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." God refuses Moses's offer and instead says, "whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book." God also says their will be consequences for those who sinned - He will send a plague on the people. Why didn't God accept Moses offer of himself as a sacrifice? He couldn't, Moses was not a perfect sacrifice, blameless and without sin.

Next week we will hear more about the consequences of the people's sin and of their repentance.

As I said in the beginning, I was really excited to be studying the book of Exodus and the power of God. However, I found myself really struggling to do this talk. Early on I thought of backing out. But they had the speaker's names printed in the front of the Bible study workbook this year - everyone would know I backed out. Part of my struggle was that I wanted to be studying God's power, not sin and idols and turning from God. Who wants to study about sin and idols and maybe have God convict you in that area? Also, I realized that as we listened to the speaker each week and discussed the chapters in our small groups, I felt like everyone thought very poorly of the Israelites and their lack of faith. They were just a bunch of ungrateful, unbelieving, grumbling, complainers. But all I could think each week was - I get the Israelites. Of course they are struggling. The wilderness is a hard and scary place. Yes, they've seen God do some pretty powerful things, but they've been mistreated and have suffered their whole life under slavery in Egypt. Undoing that isn't like flipping a switch. I would be struggling with my faith and grumbling and complaining too. I do struggle with my faith and grumble and complain. Israel saw God do some incredible and miraculous things. So have I. Even though God rescued them and provided for them over and over again, they still struggled to believe that He would continue to provide for them. I've been rescued from a life of slavery too - slavery to sin. God has provided for my needs over and over again. Yet at times I still struggle to believe he will continue to provide tomorrow. I would have been giving my gold to create the golden calf right alongside the Israelites. I do give my resources to create idols to fulfill my needs. I would have worshipped that golden calf right alongside the Israelites. I do worship idols instead of the one true God. I would have failed the wilderness test along with the Israelites. I have failed my wilderness tests. As someone who identified so much with the Israelites, what did I have to teach anyone about this chapter on the golden calf. I thought, if the Bible study

leaders knew the wilderness I went through last year and how much I struggled with it, they would never have asked me to teach.

But then God helped me to remember that there's only one person who passed the wilderness test - Jesus. If I could pass the wilderness test on my own, Jesus wouldn't have had to come. If I wasn't a grumbling, complaining, turning from God, golden calf idol making sinner, I wouldn't need Jesus. There wouldn't be any need for his perfect sacrifice for my sin. All of Exodus is to show us why we need Jesus. From the rescue from slavery in Egypt, the plagues, Passover, the Red Sea, the 10 commandments, the book of the covenant, to the instructions for the tabernacle - it all is showing us who God is, who we are, and why we need a savior.

The power of God I was looking for in Chapter 32 - I finally saw it in His love for Israel, His mercy and forgiveness of their sin, His commitment to His promise to them, His keeping the covenant even though Israel broke it, and realizing that all of those things applied to me today as well.